Sierra mountains mixes with salt water in the San Francisco Bay.

The pumps kill fish as they move fresh water south, prompting reducing pumping to protect the delta smelt fish. Farmers complain that fresh water is “wasted” when it flows into the ocean instead of being pumped south to irrigate crops. Governor Newsom supports a $20 billion project to move Sacramento River fresh water under the delta via a 45-mile tunnel so that moving water south of the delta does not kill fish.

The California Water Resources Control Board in April 2024 put five agricultural water agencies in Kings County on probation for failing to adequately manage underground water supplies in the Tulare Lake Basin that were depleted by over pumping. The State Groundwater Management Act of 2014 aims to protect the state’s aquifers from over pumping to avoid soil
subsidence; SGMA is expected to lead to the fallowing of at least 500,000 acres of irrigated farmland.

The 1,450-mile-long Colorado River provides drinking water for 40 million people, irrigates 5.5 million acres of farmland, and produces 12 billion kilowatt hours of electricity every year. More water has been drawn out of the Colorado water system than is replenished over the past decade, draining major reservoirs such as Lakes Mead and Powell.

Over half of Colorado River water is used to irrigate crops, including a third used to grow alfalfa and hay, six percent for wheat, and three percent for cotton. Cities that rely on Colorado River water have reduced their water consumption in the past decade, but alfalfa acreage has increased.

California had 39.1 million residents at the beginning of 2024, and there was population growth in 31 of the 58 counties. The US fertility rate fell to 1.6 in 2023, so that the 3.6 million babies born in 2024 were the fewest since 1979, when the US population was 225 million rather than 335 million. The US fertility rate was 2.1 in 2007.

**Government**

California faces a large and growing state government deficit of at least $30 billion. Health care workers were supposed to receive a minimum wage of at least $25 an hour beginning July 1, 2024, but this increase was postponed.

California’s statewide minimum wage is $16 in 2024. Some cities and counties have higher minimum wages, such as $19.08 in West Hollywood. The statewide minimum wage for 400,000 fast food workers employed in chains that have 60 or more US outlets rose to $20 an hour on April 1, 2024, prompting most chain restaurants to raise prices by at least 10 percent. Franchise owners determine the prices charged in chain restaurants, explaining why prices vary from store to store.

State agencies issue at least 600 major new regulations each year. Most are drafted by agency staff, undergo public hearings, and are vetted by the Office of Administrative Law before they go into effect. The Legislature has an Office of Legislative Counsel to draft laws and regulations, and there is a proposed Office of Regulatory Counsel in the governor’s office to provide another review of regulations drafted by state agencies.

California’s median statewide home price was over $900,000 in April 2024. SB 9 in 2021 eliminated local zoning laws that allowed only single-family homes. However, during SB 9’s first two years, fewer than 500 lots were subdivided into duplexes, in part because local officials set rules that made it complex to divide single family lots and build two homes. By contrast, almost 30,000 permits were issued for accessory dwelling units or granny flats in 2022.

California has a third of US residential solar panels, and they produce more electricity than is needed during the day, over 15 gigawatts in 2024. The demand for electricity in residential areas has a U-shape, with high demand in the morning and evening and little need for supplemental electricity during the day when the sun shines.

In 2023, the state reduced payments of about $0.25 per kwh to homeowners who send their excess solar energy to the grid. Since 90 percent of residential solar installations are financed with loans or leases, reduced payments for excess electricity as well as higher interest rates are slowing new solar installations.

California aims to rely on 100 percent clean energy by 2045. PGE has more than doubled the price of electricity over the past decade, and a quarter of PGE customers are behind on payments.

About 20 percent of San Francisco’s 810,000 residents are Chinese-American. Many own small businesses, encouraging them to support politicians who promise to get tough on petty crime. Lengthy school closures during covid and attacks on elderly Asians led to the recall of several school board members and the District Attorney in 2022.

**Meat and Migrants**

Tennessee-based Fayette Janitorial Service was fined $649,000 in May 2024 for employing workers under 18 to clean meat-processing plants on overnight shifts. Fayette agreed to hire a third party auditor to ensure that it did not hire underage workers who use false documents to obtain jobs.

The Moon Poultry chicken processing plant in Irwindale, California owned by Fu Qian Chen Lu was accused by DOL in March 2024 of shipping chicken processed with child labor, prompting a request to halt shipments from Moon Poultry. Chen Lu says that DOL knew an underage worker presented false documents showing the worker’s age as 18, and encouraged the worker to accept a dangerous job; DOL denies this allegation. Moon Poultry closed after the DOL allegations. Another Los Angeles-area plant, Exclusive Poultry, was ordered to pay $3.8 million in back wages in December 2023.
Major meatpackers such as Smithfield and Tyson’s are automating their dis-assembly plants to cope with rising labor costs. Major meatpackers lost money in 2023 and complained of high worker turnover, prompting them to invest in robots, especially in chicken-processing plants that take advantage of the fact that chickens are fairly uniform in size.

America First Legal sent a letter to federal and state officials asserting that Tyson Foods has 42,000 immigrants among its 120,000 US employees, which ALF alleged is immigrants among its 120,000 US employees, which ALF alleged is evidence that Tyson prefers immigrants to US citizens. The AFL filed more than 30 complaints with the EEOC and other agencies accusing US companies from Anheuser-Busch to Starbucks of preferring immigrants to US workers.

Americans consumed an average 225 pounds of meat in 2023 plus 280 eggs. USDA reports meat disappearance rather than consumption because some of the meat that is purchased is not consumed. Americans consumed 58 pounds of beef in 2023, 50 pounds of pork, and 100 pounds of chicken in 2023. Beef, which is rich in fat and protein, is the premium meat, and Omaha Steaks reported that its revenue rose over 50 percent between 2019 and 2024. Beef is about 25 percent of US meat consumption by weight, but accounts for half of US meat spending.

**Lab Meat**

Florida and Alabama in 2024 enacted laws that prohibit the manufacture and sale of lab-grown meat in their states. States with significant cattle industries in the Midwest have enacted laws that prohibit “meat” made in bioreactors from being called meat.

Venture capitalists including major meatpackers have invested over $3 billion over the past decade to produce lab-grown meat. Some meatpackers warn that bans such as those in Florida and Alabama could backfire if states such as California pass restrictions on how “real meat” is produced, as California did with pork in 2018. Instead of banning lab-grown meat, many meatpackers want it to be labeled “imitation meat.”

Advocates of lab-grown meat want to reduce the deforestation that occurs in Brazil and elsewhere to create pastures and grow feed for cattle and emissions of methane that cows produce during digestion. Companies that make lab-grown meat are trying to bring down costs in order to increase demand for meat alternatives.

**LABOR: JOBS, H-1B**

Employers continued to add jobs in spring and summer 2024, giving the US 42 consecutive months of job gains by June 2024. The unemployment rate was 4.1 percent in June 2024.

The average hourly earnings of private sector workers are $35 an hour or $70,000 a year. DOL issued a regulation to raise the minimum salary to be considered a manager exempt from overtime pay from $35,500 to $58,600, prompting employers to sue in Texas in May 2024 to block implementation.

A 2016 effort to raise the minimum wage for salaried workers to $47,000 was blocked by a federal judge in Texas in 2017.

**Workers**

The US does not have the 70,000 skilled workers needed to make semiconductor chips in the factories or fabs built with federal subsidies by Intel, TSMC and Micron. The US made 40 percent of the world’s semiconductors in 1990, and makes 10 percent today. The boom-bust fab cycle has discouraged both investors and workers, whose starting wages are $20 to $25 an hour.

Youth are most interested in earn-and-learn apprenticeship programs rather than programs that require costly training upfront and do not guarantee a job upon graduation.

Amazon, which began in 1995 as an online bookstore and has evolved into the largest online marketplace, uses stack ranking, rating employees and firing the lowest ranked six percent each year. One result is fierce competition among senior employees to achieve a higher ranking, since executives often receive restricted stock options that have value only after several years at Amazon.

Amazon’s online marketplace and AWS cloud computing service give it information on competitors who allege that Amazon sees what consumers want and often seeks to offer similar products at lower prices. Amazon successfully challenged many incumbents, bankrupting them and raising FTC concerns as Amazon’s share of US online sales surpassed 40 percent in 2023.

Walmart had sales of $650 billion in 2023, over $1 million a minute, compared with $575 billion for Amazon. Walmart has 4,700 US store managers who earn $200,000 to $300,000 a year. A Walmart superstore as large as several football fields has 300 employees and sales of over $100 million a year, with peak sales from 5 to 7pm. Each store has an HR manager, and employees or associates begin and end meetings with the Walmart Cheer.

The three US cities with the worst commercial real estate markets are Seattle, San Francisco, and Washington, DC. Seattle and San Francisco have mostly private sector tech workers, many of whom work remotely, while Washington, DC
Agricultural and Resource Economics

Boeing, a symbol of US engineering prowess, has been mired in controversy since 737 Max crashes in 2018 and 2019 killed 346 people in Indonesia and Ethiopia. Ex-Boeing employees and airlines complained about a cultural transformation at Boeing that prioritized profits over safety after a merger with McDonnell Douglas in 1997.

Boeing, which has an order backlog of 5,600 planes worth $448 billion, pleaded guilty in July 2024 to felony fraud charges for misleading regulators about the operation of an automated control system after the crashes. Boeing is a major military contractor: a third of Boeing’s $78 billion of revenue in 2023 was from the federal government.

H-1B

Several dozen experienced US IT workers in 2023-24 accused Tata Consultancy Services of unlawful race and age discrimination when they were laid off and replaced by lower-wage Indian IT workers, including some with H-1B visas. TCS has over 600,000 employees, most in India.

TCS, which gets half of its revenue from North America, has a business model that depends on having a small number of Indian IT workers in person at workplaces where it provides services and many more support workers in India, enabling TCS to offer IT services at low cost. The laid off US workers complained to the EEOC that TCS managers said they wanted to reduce the number of expensive US employees and outsource more client work to India.

Theory

Economists are struggling to understand the 2020s economy. Most economists expected the inflation that appeared in 2021 to be transitory, followed by a consensus that higher interest rates would lead to a recession and rising unemployment.

Why were economists’ predictions wrong? Covid was the first pandemic in modern times that led to government lockdowns and almost $5 trillion in stimulus, equivalent to 20 percent of US GDP. Consumer spending during and after covid increased demand at a time of strained supply chains, fueling inflation that was sustained by consumer demand.

Some economists say that instead of economic booms and busts, today’s economy is akin to a satellite with a wobbly orbit. Between the 1850s and 1980s, the US had 30 recessions that averaged 18 months long, with periods of economic growth averaging 33 months between the recessions. Since the early 1980s, there have been four recessions averaging nine months each, with economic growth between the recessions averaging 104 months.

One reason for fewer recessions may be the rise of the service economy, which accounts for 70 to 80 percent of US employment and consumption. During the 19th and 20th centuries, agriculture and manufacturing were a much larger share of the US economy.

Tesla and SpaceX CEO Elon has joined utopians in predicting a future in which goods made in factories and some services will be nearly free. Musk says that “digital super intelligence combined with robotics will essentially make goods and services close to free in the long term.” Musk, who fears that low birth rates will raise wages in the long run, wants to develop humanoid robots to compensate for a lack of workers to fill 3-D jobs, dirty, difficult and dangerous.

Many of those who believe that AI and robots will do most work in the future advocate a universal basic incomes (UBI) for all people. UBI proposals are often linked to discussions of curbing inequality. However, policies that increase equality in one dimension of life such as income may increase inequality in others. There are disagreements over whether policies should aim to achieve equality of opportunity or equality of outcome.

Hunter-gatherer societies often achieve equality within the group but wage war on other clans, suggesting that equality within a group can be accompanied by inequality between groups. The human instinct to want equality while simultaneously seeking distinction from others in the group appears to be universal.

What are the benefits of agglomeration, the encounters in cities that can lead to new ideas and industries that spur productivity growth. The slow return to in-person work after covid is raising the question of whether economists who urged cities to make themselves attractive to the creative class in order to spur growth were correct if more people work remotely.

Another economic theory being questioned is “nudge economics,” the notion that prices and rules can lead to “good” individual behavior, such as automatically enrolling workers in 401k plans unless they opt out, or automatically enrolling everyone in organ donation programs. Behavioral economics argues that good nudges, such as getting taxpayers to sign an honesty pledge at the top rather than the bottom of tax returns, increases honesty.
However, some of the major findings of behavioral economics are being questioned after reviews of earlier studies find false or manipulated data and misleading conclusions. For example, automatic enrollment got more employees into 401k plans but, as their retirement savings increased, more workers cashed out early, leaving them no better off.

**Prediction**

Manifold Markets allows users to create markets and make real-money bets on outcomes, with winners paid in Mana that can be donated or used for more bets. Manifold Markets is backed by venture capitalists who believe that prediction markets based on betting with money are more reliable than opinion polls because markets aggregate and filter information and are continuously updated.

So-called Rationalists believe that prediction markets are the most reliable guide to the future, and often superior to expert predictions and polls, noting that short sellers can be the first to detect problems at firms that will lower stock prices.

Markets for crypto currencies are volatile, with the value of Bitcoin rising from less than $5,000 in 2018 to over $60,000 in 2021 before falling to less than $20,000 in 2022 (Bitcoin was worth $30,000 at the end of 2023). US FTX founder Sam Bankman-Fried or SBF was convicted in New York in November 2023 after the interconnected FTX-Alameda firms lost $8 billion in consumer deposits. Korean Do Kown of Terraform Labs became a fugitive after the crash of TerraUSD and Luna, algorithmic stable coins that were supposed to be stable at $1, led to $40 billion in losses in 2022.

Crypto markets such as FTX allow people to trade tokens with no fundamental value via complex and poorly regulated financial machinery. Instead of trusting governments, as with fiat money, crypto traders trust the individuals who operate exchanges. FTX-Alameda has been described as a casino that was owned by SBF and allowed SBF and his colleagues to gamble with customers money.

SBF prompted an outpouring of commentary on issues ranging from entitled youth (SBF’s parents are law professors at Stanford) to effective altruism, since SBF promised to make as money and then give it away to tackle problems facing humanity. Prosecutors convinced a jury that SBF cultivated an image of a boy genius with unkempt hair and informal dress who took enormous risks to hide the financial fraud at FTX-Alameda.

**DEI**

Diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) offices are being rebranded as offices of engagement with similar missions, such as one DEI office that was renamed an office for Organizational Effectiveness, Leadership Development and Inclusive Excellence or Diversity and Engagement.

Columbia, which was rocked by pro-Palestine demonstrations in April-May 2024, has one of the highest share of foreign students among US universities, with over 20,000 of its 37,000 students foreigners, including 7,000 who are in Optional Practical Training in off campus jobs. Similarly, New York University has 20,000 foreigners among its 50,000 students and Northeastern has 20,000 foreigners among 37,000 students. USC has 18,000 foreigners among 50,000 students, and Uni-Illinois has 15,000 foreigners among 55,000 students.

The academic publishing industry is a $30 billion a year business for Elsevier, Springer, Wiley, and other firms that rely on editors and peer reviewers to screen papers before they are published. The proliferation of journals and the practice of inviting guest editors to invite authors to prepare papers for special issues has led to a proliferation of “paper mills” that use AI to generate papers that are published on behalf of researchers seeking peer-reviewed publications. In response to such fraud, some journals are restricting the number of special issues.

**Farm Workers**

**California: Overtime**

Does California’s AB 1066 law, which mandates overtime pay at 1.5 times the usual wage for farm workers after eight hours of work in a day or 40 hours in a week, increase or decrease the hours worked and earnings of farm workers? There were no studies of the likely effects of AB 1066 on worker hours and earnings before AB 1066 was implemented in 2019. Three types of workers who typically work long hours were expected to be most affected: dairy and other animal workers, equipment operators and irrigators.

The question was whether farmers would pay overtime to these workers or reduce their usual hours of work.

Most evidence suggests that farm employers reduced hours. The USDA Farm Labor Survey found that the average weekly hours of directly hired California workers fell relative to the average weekly hours of all US directly hired farm workers. In 2016, California’s directly hired farm workers averaged 2.7 more hours a week than all US farm workers. That fell to +1.9 more hours a week in 2019, +0.1 hours in 2021, and -1 hour in 2023, which means that directly hired California farm workers averaged an hour less per week in 2023 than all US farm workers.
The NAWS interviews 500 to 600 California crop workers a year. Workers reported fewer hours worked during the previous week in 2019 and 2020 than in 2018; overtime pay began in 2019, and 8/40 overtime was required for employers of 25 or more workers in 2022. A quarter of the crop workers interviewed in 2019-20 reported working 46 to 50 hours a week, another quarter 36 to 40 hours, and about an eighth each reported 41 to 45 and 51 to 55 hours.

An analysis using NAWS data concluded that SB 1066 led to fewer hours and lower weekly earnings, especially for workers who had been employed more than 50 hours a week before 2019. NAWS data suggest that employers tried to avoid paying overtime by limiting most workers to 40 hours a week, which meant lower weekly earnings for workers who had been employed for longer work weeks.

American Community Survey data based on interviews conducted with workers in their homes also found reduced hours of work for California farm workers. ACS Q40 asks how many weeks the respondent worked in the previous 12 months and Q41 asks how many hours per week the respondent usually worked when they were employed, so ACS data on average hours per week reflect recall responses.

ACS Q42 asks for the name and type of employer, allowing the ACS to impute the industry or NAICS code of the employer where the respondent worked the most hours and the respondent’s occupation and duties. Q43 asks for the respondent’s income over the past 12 months, including income from wages and salaries, investments and public assistance.

The ACS found that the usual weekly hours of California farm workers fell from 42.5 in 2018 to 40.5 in 2021 and to 39.6 in 2022, and the share of farm workers employed more than 40 hours a week shrank. However, nominal farm worker earnings rose in lockstep with minimum wage increases, and rose especially rapidly between 2021 and 2022.

The most comprehensive data on farm worker earnings are from the employment and earnings data reported by farm employers when paying UI taxes to EDD. The UI data do not include hours worked, but they provide a count of all hired workers on the payroll for the pay period that includes the 12th of the month and all earnings paid to all workers each quarter.

EDD can extract earnings data of all California workers who were employed during other payroll periods by farm employers and assign them to the NAICS commodity of the employer where the worker had his/her highest earnings. The result is a census of primary farm workers, or workers whose highest earnings were with a California farm employer (NAICS 11), and then distinguish between a crop employer, a strawberry employer, or a dairy employer.

EDD data find an average 724,500 primary farm workers between 2018 and 2021, with a drop of one percent between 2018 and 2021. The number of primary crop workers fell four percent during these years, the number of primary vegetable workers fell 10 percent, and the number of primary grape workers fell 30 percent. The number of primary animal workers fell two percent, while the number of primary crop support workers rose by two percent, including a five percent jump in primary FLC workers to 333,000, meaning that 333,000 or 46 percent of all primary farm workers had their highest earning job with a FLC.

The EDD data permit analysis of changes in average annual earnings by commodity or NAICS of the employer. Average annual earnings for primary crop workers rose between 2018 and 2020, and then fell sharply between 2020 and 2021, down 15 to 20 percent in most commodities. The drop in the average annual earnings of primary farm workers may reflect the demand for workers falling faster than supply during covid and employers reducing the hours of workers to avoid paying overtime wages.

The Central Coast Alliance United for a Sustainable Economy (CAUSE) and the Mixteco/Indigena Community Organizing Project (MICOP) held a march April 28, 2024 in Santa Maria to demand higher piece rate wages for picking strawberries, which are typically $2.50 per flat of eight one-pound clamshells. The two NGOs argued that piece rates must increase to allow farm workers to afford to live in Santa Barbara County.

Over 100 workers and their supporters demonstrated in May 2024 at a wine event in Healdsburg demanding at least $25 an hour or $250 a ton to harvest wine grapes.

Heat and Transport

SB 1299 would presume that any heat-related illnesses experienced by farm workers are heat related if they performed any work during the workweek or pay period under conditions that would trigger the Heat Illness Prevention standard. If enacted, SB 1299 would allow affected farm workers to collect workers compensation benefits and create a $5 million Farmworker Climate Change Heat Injury and Death Fund from the Workers Compensation Administration’s Revolving Fund.

California, Colorado, Minnesota, Oregon and Washington have state laws that protect workers from excess heat. The federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration in July 2024 proposed
regulations to protect both indoor and outdoor private sector workers from excess heat. The OSHA rule, which would require employers to provide water and shaded break areas when temperatures exceed 80°F and to monitor workers for signs of heat illness when temperatures exceed 90°F, would affect an estimated 35 million workers.

After an accident killed 13 Mexican-born farm workers near Five Points in 1999, California required vans carrying nine or more farm workers to be inspected by the CHP. In response, many growers stopped providing transportation for their employees. Today, most workers carpool or pay for rides in vans that can carry eight or fewer passengers. The CHP has found vans that should seat eight sometimes carrying more workers by having them sit on buckets or on the floor.

About 60 percent of California farm worker deaths in recent years occurred in transportation accidents, while 40 percent were in farm workplaces.

Growers say that federal and state laws and regulations contributed to the shift to smaller farm labor vans. California has been issuing driver’s licenses to unauthorized residents since 2015, and federal laws that require insurance of at least $100,000 per seat in farm labor vehicles contributed to fewer employers offering transportation.

The 1999 accident also led to CallVans, a program with a fleet of 1,000 inspected vans driven by farm workers without CDLs to workplaces, with the eight to 15 riders helping to pay for gas at a cost of about $8 a day. The California Air Resources Board requires local government agencies such as CalVans have 10 percent EVs by 2025 and all EV fleets by 2035. Ford electric cargo vans cost $90,000, double the $45,000 of gas-fueled vans, have a maximum range of about 125 miles, and must be charged at least two hours to go their maximum range.

DOL in May 2024 required two Half Moon Bay mushroom farms to pay $450,000 in back wages and damages to 62 workers; the farms made news in January 2023 when a worker killed seven co-workers. Concord Farms and California Terra Gardens had different owners but shared employees.

**Arizona**

The Saudi dairy giant Almarai operates the Fondomonte farm in southwestern Arizona on 3,500 acres of land leased from the state; Fondomonte pumps groundwater to grow alfalfa that is exported to the Middle East. As residential wells dry up, local residents want to reduce irrigated agriculture.

**Florida, Southeast**

A 26-year-old Mexican H-2A worker died in 100°F heat on his first day of work in September 2023 while helping to plant sugar cane for McNeill Labor Management Inc of Belle Glade. McNeill, which faces about $28,000 in OSHA fines, contested the fine.

A DUI driver crashed into a bus in May 2024 near Ocala, FL, killing eight of the 53 H-2A workers on a bus transporting them 45 miles from a hotel in Gainesville to harvest watermelons on Cannon Farms. The workers were employed by Olvera Trucking Harvesting Corp.

North Carolina in May 2024 agreed to pay $885,000 to animal rights groups who opposed a state law that banned employees from filming the conditions of animals on the farms where they worked. The North Carolina law allowed employers to sue employees who secretly filmed conditions on the farms, which federal courts found unconstitutional. Similar laws in four other states have been found to be unconstitutional, while ag-gag laws in six other states have not yet been challenged.

**Northeast, Midwest, Northwest**

**Maine**

The median age of residents is 45, the oldest in the US, and immigrants are increasingly filling jobs, especially in traditional sectors such as seafood processing that pay relatively low wages for low-skilled workers.

**New York**

Over 65,000 of the 200,000 migrants who arrived in the past two years were being housed in New York City in April 2024, some in tent cities located at unused public facilities. New York City has long been a destination for immigrants, but many residents resent the cost of housing newcomers who crossed the Mexico-US border illegally and are now being housed and fed by the city government.

In spring 2024, New York City limited stays for migrant families in emergency shelters to 60 days, and for solo migrants 30 days. Other cities with Democratic mayors have also begun to impose limits on migrant stays in shelters that are paid for by local taxpayers.

**West Virginia**

West Virginia has an aging and shrinking population but does not welcome immigrants. Less than two percent of WV residents were born outside the US, so there are few anchor migrants to attract more. The historic Greenbrier resort in the southeastern corner of the state is owned by Governor Jim Justice and relies on guest workers. on.

**Pennsylvania**

The most populous swing state in 2024 highlights growing support
for Democrats among urban college-educated professionals and support for Trump among those with less education outside central cities. The seven counties surrounding Allegany County (Pittsburgh) that depend on fracking and other blue-collar jobs tend to vote Republican, while the professionals employed in Pittsburgh’s medical and tech industries tend to support Democrats.

Western Pennsylvania was once a steel powerhouse with almost 400,000 manufacturing jobs in the early 1950s, compared with less than 100,000 such jobs today.

**Minnesota**

A suit filed on behalf of 38 H-2A workers employed by Svihel Vegetable Farm in Foley between 2013 and 2022 accuses Svihel of violating the Trafficking Victims Protection Act by requiring them to sometimes work over 100 hours a week and not paying the H-2A workers for all the hours worked. Svihel said the suit was without merit, and that its 2024 wages were $18.50 an hour and $27.75 for overtime work. Svihel paid $770,000 to settle worker complaints of illegal fees paid by H-2A workers in 2016-17.

**Wisconsin**

Democrats and Republicans are holding their nominating conventions in the Midwest in 2024 in Chicago and Milwaukee, respectively. The Democratic convention scheduled for Milwaukee was cancelled in 2020 due to covid.

**Colorado**

UFCW Local 8 organized workers employed at the Green Dragon cannabis greenhouse in Denver under the 2021 Farmworkers Bill of Rights that gave farm workers the right to organize into unions and bargain with employers. The state anticipated six union elections a year, but there has been only one since the law went into effect in 2022, although the UFCW is trying to organize workers employed by other cannabis greenhouses.

**Idaho**

A supervisor for F.D.C., an agricultural services company that operates farms throughout Idaho, unlawfully charged H-2A workers almost $500,000 in fees for their jobs between 2005 and 2019 and failed to pay taxes on the extra income.

**Oregon**

The US Supreme Court in June 2024 ruled that the 40,000-resident city of Grants Pass can cite homeless people who camp in public spaces, overturning a 9th Circuit decision in 2018 that found fines on homeless campers violated the “cruel and unusual punishment” punishment clause in the 8th Amendment unless cities can show there are beds available in shelters.

The US has seen about 650,000 homeless people, including almost a third in California. The number of homeless has increased despite significant public spending. Residents near public parks complain that they cannot be used for pleasure because of homeless residents.

**Washington**

HB 2226 requires the state Employment Security Department to collect data on the number of H-2A workers who are employed on farms when ESD conducts field visits to educate employers and workers and to ensure compliance with H-2A regulations. The bill directs ESD to compare data collected during field visits to employer H-2A job orders.

The Familias Unidas por la Justicia union sued DOL, alleging that DOL’s failure to require employers to offer and pay prevailing piece rate wages for picking apples and other fruit hurt US farm workers. The suit argued that, by certifying farms to pay only the AEWR of $19.25 in 2024, the wages of fast US apple pickers who typically earn $30 a bin for picking apples and $25 to $35 an hour in piece rate earnings were depressed.

The Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in May 2024 agreed with Familias Unidas and returned the case to a federal district court, which issued an injunction in July 2024 ordering DOL to require employers seeking certification to employ H-2A workers to pay at least prevailing piece rate wages for cherry, apple, pear, and berry harvesters.

**Alaska**

Alaska’s 150 seafood processing plants employ a peak 20,000 workers in July, when many migrant workers arrive to process salmon and other fish. Kodiak has 17 fish processing plants, followed by Naknek and Unalaska (11 each), and Kenia and Sitka (7 each). The largest wild salmon fishery is in Bristol Bay, which averages about 40 million sockeye salmon caught each year as they return to spawn where they were born.

**ALRB, Unions**

**ALRB**

The United Farm Workers (UFW) was certified by the ALRB to represent the employees of four farm employers via card check rather than secret ballot elections: DiMare or DMB Packing (300 employees), Olive Hill Nursery (70), Ho Sai Gai Farms (115), and Wonderful Nurseries (640); some reports suggest Wonderful has 60 year-round and 1,500 seasonal workers.

In each case, the UFW submitted signatures from a bare majority of workers. The UFW last won a secret-ballot election in 2017.

Wonderful challenged the ALRB’s certification of the UFW. Wonderful
said that the UFW invited Wonderful employees to a meeting to receive $600 USDA checks from the UFW Foundation and tricked them into signing UFW authorization cards. Wonderful presented 150 declarations from employees who said they were tricked into signing the UFW cards and wanted to withdraw their signatures.

The UFW-Wonderful dispute raises many questions, including how long worker signatures on union cards are valid and whether they can be withdrawn. Wonderful in May 2024 challenged the constitutionality of the card-check system, alleging that it forces farms to negotiate with certified unions even if they believe that the ALRB made a mistake in certifying the union to represent their employees.

Wonderful noted that card check regulations did not require worker signatures to be dated, did not require employees to identify their farm employer, and included no mechanism for workers to withdraw their signatures. Proposed ALRB regulations would require that union authorization card signatures be dated, name the worker’s employer, and state that the signature is valid for one year.

The grower-funded California Farmworker Information Center is running ads on 14 Spanish-language radio stations in key agricultural regions that explain card check and emphasize that workers must pay dues to unions under collective bargaining agreements.

**NLRB**

The US Supreme Court in June 2024 curbed the authority of the National Labor Relations Board to order employers to reinstate fired employees while their cases are being considered by the NLRB. Starbucks fired seven employees in Memphis in 2022 who allowed a TV crew into a store after hours, prompting the NLRB to obtain an injunction that ordered Starbucks to reinstate the fired workers while it considered the worker’s charges and Starbucks’ defense.

Starbucks appealed to the USSC, where Starbucks, Amazon and Trader Joe’s are challenging the constitutionality of the NLRB’s structure that involves a General Counsel who brings complaints against employers that are handled by ALJs and then appealed to a five-member Board. Some 400 of Starbucks’ 9,600 company-operated US stores with 10,000 employees have voted to join the Starbucks Workers United union since 2021. Starbucks began to negotiate with SWU for a contract in April 2024.

**Unions**

The United Automobile Workers union won a vote to represent workers at a VW plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee by a 2,628 to 985 vote in April 2024; the Chattanooga plant’s workers rejected the UAW in 2014 and 2019. VW operated an assembly plant in Pennsylvania between 1978 and 1988 that experienced labor unrest, and opened the Chattanooga plant in 2011.

VW accounts for about four percent of US car sales, compared with a quarter of car sales in Europe and a seventh in China. VW employees in Germany are represented by IG Metall, the world’s largest industrial union. IG Metall representatives sit on VW’s executive board and participate in long-run strategic planning. Their presence on VW’s executive board helped to smooth the path for VW to eliminate 30,000 jobs by 2025, most in Germany, by offering early retirement packages and retraining.

The US has 20+ non-union auto plants in southern states that have right to work laws, meaning that collective bargaining agreements cannot require all of the workers covered by the CBA to be union members and pay dues. The UAW in April 2024 won a 25 percent wage increase for 7,300 Daimler Truck workers who make Freightliner trucks and Thomas-Built buses in North Carolina. However, workers at a Mercedes-Benz plants near Tuscaloosa, Alabama voted 2,642 to 2,045 for no union in May 2024.

UAW-represented employees of the Big 3 Detroit-based auto manufacturers, General Motors, Ford Motor and Stellantis, earn $40+ an hour or over $80,000 a year and have extensive health and pension benefits. Non-union auto plants in southern states pay less, $25 to $35 an hour or about $60,000 a year, and offer fewer benefits.

The SEIU, which represents mostly public-sector workers and those employed by taxpayer-funded firms, spearheaded the Fight for $15 campaign for fast-food and other workers. The SEIU is shrinking, with 1.8 million members in government, health care and janitorial services, and says that movement-based organizing such as the Fight for $15 is the wave of the future.

The Teamsters represent 310,000 UPS drivers, but not the drivers employed indirectly by FedEx and Amazon, who are contractors who deliver packages. The part-time workers who are half of the UPS workforce earn at least $21 an hour and full-time drivers up to $44 an hour in 2024, while Amazon pays an average $20 an hour to drivers.

The Amazon Labor Union that won an election at a New York City warehouse in 2022 but has been unable to negotiate a first contract in June 2024 announced an affiliation with the Teamsters, which has been trying to organize Amazon workers since 2021.
**Immigration**

**Politics, Asylum**

Immigration was a top concern of voters in 2024, when a majority of voters said that they disapproved of President Biden’s handling of “chaos” at the border.

Senate Democrats and Republicans in February 2024 developed a bipartisan proposal to reduce illegal entries over the Mexico-US border by preventing asylum seekers from entering the US and applying for asylum when there were “too many” arrivals. Ex-President Trump asked Republicans to vote against the bill, and it failed on February and May 2024 Senate votes.

Democrats and Republicans traded blame for border chaos and the failure to enact the bipartisan Senate bill. Democrats blamed Trump and Republicans for blocking the bill, while Republicans blamed Biden and Democrats for undoing Trump-era policies that had reduced illegal immigration and asylum seeking.

President Biden in June 2024 used Section 212(f) of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 to close the US border to unauthorized foreigners who enter illegally and apply for asylum. Section 212(f) allows the president to bar the entry of foreigners whose presence is “detrimental to the interests of the United States.” CBP will expel unauthorized foreigners encountered between ports of entry whenever they averaged more than 2,500 a day for a week.

When encounters average less than 1,500 a day, all unauthorized entrants can apply for asylum. Encounters averaged 3,800 a day at the beginning of June 2024 and 2,400 a day at the end of June 2024.

Even when the border is “closed,” unaccompanied children and foreigners for whom “the totality of the circumstances, urgent humanitarian, or public health interests” can enter in the US illegally and apply for asylum. Mexico will accept the return of 30,000 unauthorized foreigners a month.

Meanwhile, up to 1,500 foreigners may use the CBPOne app to make an appointment to enter the US at a port of entry, apply for asylum, and be released into the US to work or attend school while waiting for a decision on their asylum applications. Citizens of Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, and Venezuelan (CHNV) with a US sponsor may arrive at international airports in the US and avoid the closed Mexico-US border. CBPOne and CHNV entrants do not count against the 2,500 unauthorized entry number.

Migrant advocates sued to block Biden’s order, noting that federal judges blocked a similar Trump order in 2018. Republicans said that Biden’s order was too little and too late to stop a crisis created by Biden when he reversed Trump’s border-control efforts.

President Biden in June 2024 granted parole in place for an estimated 500,000 undocumented spouses of US citizens that allows them to live and work legally in the US. Foreigners who marry US citizens are eligible for immigrant visas; about 500,000 unauthorized foreigners were enrolled in DACA in June 2024. Biden in May 2024 made 100,000 DACA recipients eligible for health insurance enrollment and subsidies under the Affordable Care Act.

Biden’s uneven performance during a June 2024 debate with Trump left many Democrats urging him to allow a younger Democrat to run against Trump in November 2024. In response, Biden emphasized that he has often been counted out only to triumph eventually.

**Asylum**

Most migrants who enter the US illegally from Mexico request asylum. The US received 920,000 asylum applications in FY23, up from 76,000 in FY13; one application can cover a family, so over a million foreigners a year apply for asylum.

Family groups are half of the two million migrants encountered by Customs and Border Protection agents between ports of entry on the Mexico-US border, and another 500,000 migrants apply for asylum at POEs after making appointments on the CBPOne app.

Asylum applicants are allowed to live and work in the US until a judge rejects their application and an appeal is rejected, a process that takes an average four years. Children in asylum-seeking families attend US K-12 schools and they and their parents are eligible for some federal and state means-tested social welfare benefits.
The current refugee and asylum system was created by western governments after WWII, when governments who had refused to provide asylum to Jews fleeing the Holocaust vowed “never again.” The 1951 Refugee Convention obliges signatory countries not to remove or refoul persons to their countries of citizenship if they face “persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion.”

The Refugee Convention was developed and adopted at a time when Communist countries often restricted emigration, so most of the asylum seekers during the 1950s were people who fled from behind the Iron Curtain and did not want to return. The 1980 Refugee Act adopted the 1951 definition of refugees and pledged the US to accept 50,000 refugees a year.

Large numbers of Central American families began to seek asylum after crossing the Mexico-US border in 2013-14; their success in staying and working in the US fueled more migration from the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. When encountered by CBP, migrants who seek asylum must establish that they have a credible fear of persecution at home. Most do, explaining why fewer than five percent of asylum-seeking families are ordered to leave the US within three years.

The US accepts affirmative asylum applications from persons already in the US, some 431,000 in FY23, and received 465,000 defensive applications from persons who are encountered by CBP agents after illegal entry and apply for asylum to avoid removal. The 700 judges in 70 US immigration courts who decide the fate of individuals and families have a backlog of 3.5 million immigration cases, including over a million asylum cases.

Immigration judges recognize about 20 percent of asylum applicants as refugees.

Trump in spring 2024 asserted that other countries were emptying their prisons to send criminals to the US as asylum seekers, and that the influx of migrants is increasing violent crime and “wrecking” the US. During a fund raiser in April 2024, Trump said that the US should welcome migrants from “nice countries” such as Denmark and Norway, and not from “countries that are a disaster” such as Yemen.

Immigration advisors from the first Trump Administration made plans to expedite migrant asylum hearings if Trump is re-elected. They would rescind some of Biden’s protection-from-deportation orders and step-up pressure on countries to accept the return of their citizens that the US wants to deport.

Some Trump advisors want the US to imitate the UK-Rwanda agreement that permits the US to send migrants who arrive illegally to another country for screening and resettlement. A massive deportation campaign, Trump advisors believe, could encourage unauthorized foreigners in the US “self-deport” or leave the US.

The US Supreme Court in June 2024 ruled that the federal government does not have to give migrants a single notice of the time and place of their deportation hearing as long as migrants received the notice, even if it was delivered piece meal. The case was brought by migrants who did not appear for their deportation hearings because, they said, they were not notified properly.

History

The Immigration Act of 1924 established quotas on the number of immigrants from each country equal to two percent of the number of persons already in the US from that country according to the 1890 census (or the 1920 census after 1927), with a cap of 165,000 a year. The act required foreigners to obtain immigrant visas before leaving for the US. The share of foreign-born US residents fell from 13 percent in 1920 to five percent in 1970.

There were many reasons why the Republican-dominated Congress enacted numerical quotas in 1924, including fear of communist immigrants after the Russian Revolution and a sense that “too many” and the “wrong type” of immigrants were arriving from southern and eastern Europe. One congressional leader described them as “filthy, un-American and often dangerous.”

Liberal Paradox

Industrial democracies may face a liberal paradox when trying to manage migration. Economic theory argues that freer trade, investment and migration policies speed economic growth. However, redistributive political systems often want societies closed to members to justify taxes that support social welfare systems. Migration policies are often tugged between openness and closure, generating contradictions and gaps between migration policy goals and outcomes that can widen over time.

Managing migration is a key governmental function that is not dealt with by international organizations in the way that trade or capital flows are managed to promote openness to allow countries to take advantage of comparative advantage, the economic theory that countries should specialize in goods and services that they can produce relatively cheaply, and trade for other goods and services.

International organizations focus on how migration occurs rather than the volume of migration. They want any migration that occurs to respect
the rights of migrants, be legal and orderly, and to benefit both migrants and sending and receiving countries.

The end of the 1945-1990 Cold War was accompanied by assertions that the end of history would also mean the end of borders. The EU was in the vanguard of regional groups of countries that made it easier for citizens of member states to cross borders, prompting some to assert that they were EU citizens before they were Germans.

Meanwhile, the post-WWII human rights regime meant that many foreigners who entered another country and wanted to stay were hard to remove. The difficulty of removing foreigners from industrial democracies has encouraged countries to push their borders out, relying on other countries to prevent migrants from entering.

Rising migration pressures may encourage industrial democracies to eventually shrink human rights. Migrant advocates have been quick to use the courts to block government policies that restrict migrant access to asylum, as with US family separation or Australia’s Pacific Solution. However, they have been unable to block governments that assist transit countries from Libya to Mexico to Turkey to prevent migrants from departing.

The activist-judicial network that expanded migrant rights (and flows) may lead to restrictions that would have seemed unthinkable in the recent past. For example, the 1977 Flores settlement eventually required the US government to limit the detention of children to less than 20 days. This means that migrants who arrived in the US illegally with a child knew they would be released and fueled the smuggling of families to the US.

The major developer of the liberal paradox, James Hollifield, predicted that liberal democracies would zigzag between openness and closure in managing migration, as with President Biden’s 2020 campaign promise to reverse most of the migration policies of President Trump. As unauthorized and asylum-seeking migration increased in 2023, Biden reverted to some Trump-era policies to reduce the influx.

There are zigzags in many areas of public policy, from managing trade and reducing crime to relying on prices and markets rather than regulation. Pendulums that in the past swung toward more free trade and shorter prison terms may reverse as realities change.

The recommended three-pronged US immigration reform policy of many migration researchers includes: (1) the legalization of most of the 11-12 million unauthorized foreigners in the US; (2) more funding to quickly distinguish refugees from other asylum seekers; and (3) more and larger guest worker programs for low-skilled workers so that legal guest workers can substitute for unauthorized migrants.

Implementing such policies is unlikely to be a magic bullet for unwanted migration. The 1987-88 amnesty legalized 2.7 million foreigners, 85 percent Mexicans, created a false documents industry that enabled some ineligible migrants to become immigrants and unauthorized migrants who continued to arrive to satisfy I-9 requirements and find US jobs, and prompted a surge in illegal migration in the early 1990s despite a recession in California that prompted Prop 187 in 1994.

Similarly, asylum reform may not be simple. There is a tradeoff between quickly distinguishing “true refugees” from others. Should the emphasis be on ensuring that no one who faces persecution at home is returned? Or should the emphasis be on deterring migrants who face difficulties but not persecution at home from traveling to apply for asylum?

Finally, optimizing low-skilled guest worker programs is an endless quest with often unanticipated consequences. Employers have alternatives to low-skilled workers, including substituting technology for labor or ceasing production and allowing the good or service to be imported.

The usual counter-argument is that the alternatives are not feasible or they would have been implemented already. However, experience shows that a labor supply shock may be required to prompt change, as with the mechanization of the processing tomato harvest in the 1960s after the Bracero program ended or the shift to self-service gas in the 1970s.

Abortion, guns and migration are controversial issues that are helping to stack the political identities of US voters, so that race, religion, geographical location and education align with partisan identity. Once stacked, Americans are slow to change their political affiliation, so that elections are decided by a small number of swing votes in a handful of states.

DHS: CBP, USCIS

CBP

CBP agents encountered a record 300,000 migrants just inside the US border with Mexico in December 2023. Encounters between and at ports of entry fell to 190,000 in February and March 2024 and to 170,000 in May 2024; a third of encounters are at ports of entry where those using false documents try to enter the US. A major reason for the reduction in encounters was Mexican authorities intercepting up
to 8,000 migrants a day headed for the US border.

Some 1,500 migrants a day continue to enter the US legally to apply for asylum after making appointments using the CBP One app.

**USCIS**

A backlog of requests for employment authorization documents (EADS) or work permits prompted USCIS in April 2024 to extend EADs for 800,000 foreigners, many of whom are waiting for resolution of their asylum applications, from 180 to 540 days.

President Biden granted temporary protected status to 300,000 Haitians who arrived in the US between November 2022 and June 2024, allowing them to live and work in the US legally due to gang violence and an unstable government in Haiti.

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**H-2A; H-2B**

DOL certified 3,800 farm employers to fill 54,300 jobs with H-2A workers in the first quarter of FY24, up 600 employers but down 400 jobs in the first quarter of FY23. The largest H-2A employers, who are often FLCs, were certified for fewer H-2A workers.

For example, Fresh Harvest had 8,500 certified jobs in FY22 and 6,000 in FY23, while Foothill Packing had 5,800 certified jobs in FY22 and 4,800 in FY23.

The Southeastern Legal Foundation filed suit in June 2024 against DOL for issuing a regulation that would prohibit farm employers from retaliating against H-2A workers to try to unionize. The SLF believes that the USSC’s 6-3 decision reversing the Chevron rule, a 1984 USSC decision that allowed federal agencies to interpret ambiguous laws enacted by Congress, will reduce the power of DOL to issue new H-2A regulations.

USDA in June 2024 awarded $50 million to 141 organizations in 40 states through the Farm Labor Stabilization and Protection Pilot Program to strengthen protections for farm workers. Farm employers who receive the USDA grants promised to increase employee benefits, establish employer-employee partnerships, and offer English classes and training to help farm workers to obtain driver’s licenses. Most of the participating employers who use the H-2A program plan to recruit some workers from Northern Triangle countries.

**AEWR**

US farmers can be certified to fill seasonal jobs with H-2A guest workers if they try and fail to recruit US workers despite offering housing, transport and other benefits and paying the Adverse Effect Wage Rate that varies across states from less than $15 to over $19 an hour; the AEWR is higher than the federal or state minimum wage. Settled US workers in employment similar to H-2A workers must also be paid the AEWR.

Farmers complain that the AEWR is too high and rises unevenly from year to year, sometimes increasing 10 to 20 percent in one year.

The AEWR is the average hourly earnings of various types of workers who are hired directly by farmers who respond to USDA’s Farm Labor Survey, which obtains responses from half of the 16,000 farms that respond about the hired workers they employ. The survey is conducted in April and October, and respondents report employment and earnings for these months as well as January and July.

The April 2024 data found 620,000 directly hired workers, 90 percent of whom were expected to be employed on the responding farm 150 days or more. California accounted for 22 percent of these direct hires, and average hours of work varied from 37 in California to 45 in the mountain states.

Average hourly earnings for field and livestock workers ranged from about $16 in southeastern states to $20 in California in April 2024. Other crop farms (FVH farms) employed over half of all workers and had the highest field and livestock earnings of over $18, compared to $17 for livestock farms. A third of directly hired workers were on livestock farms.

The hourly earnings of all farm workers were highest on farms with sales of $1 million or more, and the lowest were farms with $50,000 to $100,000 in sales. Farms with sales of $1 million or more employed three-fourths of hired farm workers.

Over 40 percent of the 620,000 hired workers in April 2024 were crop workers (45-2092), 20 percent were livestock workers (45-2093), and almost 20 percent were equipment operators (45-2091). There was a wage hierarchy: equipment operators averaged almost $19, crop workers $18, and livestock workers $17.

**Effects**

What is the effect of a rising AEWR on the wages of the settled farm workers who account for 85 percent of average employment on crop farms? Farmers believe that the AEWR “pulls up” the wages of settled farm workers (70 percent of crop workers were born outside the US, but these legal and unauthorized workers are settled in the US), while worker advocates believe that the AEWR puts a lid or cap on farm wages because farmers can hire an unlimited number of H-2A workers at the AEWR.

Farm labor market studies suggest that a rising AEWR pulls up the hourly earnings of settled farm
workers for two reasons. First is an employer-demand effect. Since H-2A workers must be paid the AEWR and require employers to provide housing and transportation, a rising AEWR encourages farmers to pay more to US workers, who do not require employer-provided housing and transportation.

Second is a supply or lighthouse effect. Most settled farm workers know the minimum wage and the AEWR, and some may move to farms that are paying the AEWR and avoid farms that offer only the minimum wage.

A study using USDA Farm Labor Survey hourly earnings data between 1991 and 2022 suggests that a 10 percent increase in the AEWR raises the earnings of settled non-H-2A farm workers by three percent, and by five percent in the five states that have over half of H-2A job certifications. The study suggests that a rising AEWR pulls up the wages of settled farm workers, and pulls up wages more in states with more H-2A workers.

**Braceros**

The Bracero program admitted about 4.5 million Mexican guest workers between 1942 and 1964. Many returned year-after-year, so that an estimated 1.5 million to two million Mexicans participated.

Many Braceros (for brazos or arms) entered the US at the Rio Vista Bracero Reception Center in Socorro, Texas, which was made a national historic landmark in 2023 and received English and Spanish plaques May 2024.

**CANADA, MEXICO**

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau in April 2024 said that too many temporary foreign workers and foreign students were arriving in Canada, and that immigration must be brought “under control.” The share of Canadian residents who are temporary migrants rose from two percent in 2017 to seven percent or 2.7 million in 2024; the government wants to reduce this to five percent by 2027.

Reasons for the government’s reversal on migration include rising rents and scarce social services. Canada aimed to admit 500,000 immigrants a year between 2023 and 2025, plus a million foreign students, many of whom become immigrants after graduation, plus migrant workers, some of whom are sponsored by their employers for immigrant visas. Two-step immigration makes foreign students willing to pay high tuition and migrant workers desirable to employers.

Conestoga College in Kitchener had about 2,500 foreign students among 12,000 total students in 2017, and 30,000 foreign students among 45,000 total students in 2023, the most foreign students of any Canadian college. Most Conestoga foreign students work part time.

There were 190,000 temporary foreign workers in Canada at the end of 2023, up fourfold from less than 50,000 in 2017. Most employers may have a maximum 10 percent temporary foreign workers, but hotels and restaurants were allowed to have up to 30 percent migrant workers in 2022 after complaining of labor shortages.

Canadian supply management policies set minimum prices for dairy and poultry commodities that are higher than world prices to protect Canadian farmers. In turn, farmers must have licenses to produce dairy and poultry commodities, imports of dairy and poultry products face high tariffs, and Canadians pay high prices for milk and eggs. Canadian farmers of canola, wheat, beef, and maple syrup depend on exports, so they oppose supply management that makes it harder for them to export their commodities.

**Mexico**

President AMLO in April 2024 pledged to support US efforts to reduce the transit of migrants seeking asylum in the US by “implement[ing] concrete measures to significantly reduce irregular border crossings while protecting human rights.”

Almost 100 million Mexicans were eligible to vote June 2, 2024, when Morena’s Claudia Sheinbaum, a Jewish woman with a PhD in energy engineering who lived in the San Francisco Bay Area in the 1990s, became Mexico’s first female president after winning almost 60 percent of the vote. Outgoing President AMLO endorsed Sheinbaum, and the AMLO-Sheinbaum Morena party controls both houses of Congress and 23 of Mexico’s 32 states.

AMLO doubled the minimum wage and tripled government spending on social welfare from $8 billion in 2018 to $24 billion in 2023. AMLO proposed that the 46 percent of Mexicans workers in the formal sector workers who are 65 and older and who contributed to IMSS or ISSTE pension programs should receive a pension equal to their final salary up to about $1,000 a month. AMLO would take the money for these higher pensions from monies held by about 10 banks (Afore) that belong to retirees who are 70 and older but had no activity with their accounts for at least three years.

Sheinbaum promised to continue AMLO’s policies, including using the military for major infrastructure projects and giving millions of poor Mexicans cash transfer payments.

AMLO was unable to reduce cartel violence during his six-year term. Cartels are entrenched in many communities, selecting candidates to run for office and killing or forcing the withdrawal of candidates for
Mexico produced 2.8 million metric tons of avocados in 2024 from almost 260,000 hectares. Three-fourths of Mexican avocados are from Michoacán, where orchards are planted from 800m to 2,500m above sea level and each tree yields about 170 pounds of fruit; the primary harvest is between September and February. Mexico exports half of its avocados, some 1.4 million tons in 2023 worth $3 billion. USDA in June 2024 suspended inspections of Mexican avocados from Michoacán destined for the US, citing concerns about the security of its inspectors.

Mexico produces 3.3 million metric tons of tomatoes from 47,000 hectares, and exported 2 million tons to the US worth $3 billion. Sinaloa produces a quarter of Mexican tomatoes, followed by an eighth in San Luis Potosí. Tomatoes are produced year-round, but production peaks between October and December. Two-thirds of Mexican tomatoes are produced in greenhouses or other protected structures.

**Dominican Republic**

President Luis Abinader was re-elected in May 2024 with 57 percent of the vote after building a wall on the Haiti-Dominican Republic border and deporting Haitians inside the Dominican Republic; over 600,000 Dominicans in the US and 100,000 in Spain could cast votes. Some 130,000 children born to unauthorized Haitians in the Dominican Republic are not Dominican citizens under a 2010 Supreme Court ruling. Tourism accounts for a sixth of the Dominican Republic economy, which is growing faster than in other Latin American economies.

There are up to 500,000 Haitians in the Dominican Republic. Many fill jobs on farms, at construction sites, and in private homes, and some have temporary work permits. With few avenues to become legal Dominican Republic residents, unauthorized Haitians are vulnerable to police who seek them out for deportation and sometimes steal their belongings.

**Colombia**

A Florida jury in June 2024 ordered Chiquita Brands to pay $38 million in compensation to 16 family members of farmers and other civilians who were killed by the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, a paramilitary group that Chiquita paid from 1997 to 2004.

Other Colombian families have also sued Chiquita in US courts over killings in Colombia during a civil war that ended in 2016. The Chiquita suit filed in 2007 was the first to reach a verdict, and Chiquita vowed to appeal.

**EUROPE, ASIA**

EU member countries received 11 million asylum applications in 2023, the most since two million arrived in 2015-16, plus 4.4 million Ukrainians who have TPS in EU countries. Many of the asylum applications were from the 380,000 migrants who entered the EU illegally. Over a million asylum applications are expected in 2024.

About 40 percent of asylum applicants in the EU receive some form of protection, although the acceptance rate varies from country to country. Over half of the Syrians, Eritreans, Somalis and Afghans receive protection, compared with less than 10 percent of Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and Albanians.

The European Migration and Asylum Pact approved by the European Parliament in April 2024 aims to reduce the number of asylum seekers. Migrants encountered at EU borders who are six and older will be fingerprinted, photographed and detained in for up to 12 weeks. Migrants who transited safe countries where they could have applied for asylum, and those from countries where fewer than 20 percent of applicants receive asylum such as Morocco and Serbia, will be processed in a fast-track system to expedite their expulsion.

Front-line countries are responsible for asylum seekers for up to 20 months, but non-front-line countries must accept at least 30,000 asylum seekers a year from front-line states or pay E20,000 for each asylum seeker they refuse, or up to E300 million a year.

The EU is providing more assistance to North African countries to intercept and block the movement of migrants headed to Europe. In some cases, migrants intercepted by the Tunisian coast guard were reportedly dumped in the desert to fend for themselves.

Some 370 million people in the 27-EU countries were eligible to vote in June 2024 for the 720 representatives to the European Parliament, which approves EU leaders and the EU’s $1 trillion a year budget. Current European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen leads the conservative European People’s Party of similar national parties, which won 184 seats, followed by the left-leaning Socialists and Democrats with 139 seats.

Anti-migrant populist parties won seats, while Green parties lost seats, especially in Germany. The European Conservatives and Reformists led by Italian PM Giorgia Meloni won 73 seats. France’s Marine Le Pen’s Identity and Democracy group that received 32 percent of the French vote and won 58 seats, while France’s governing Renaissance party received only 15 percent of the French vote.
and won 20 seats. Germany’s AfD received over 15 percent of the German European Parliament vote, more than Chancellor Olaf Schultz’s Social Democrats.

Right-wing parties were bolstered by farmers and others who protested against “Brussels bureaucrats” who developed regulations to speed the transition to a green economy. The greenwash may slow or reverse EU efforts to reduce carbon emissions, such as an end to sales of gas-fueled cars in 2035. Covid, inflation, and the Russia-Ukraine war upended the march toward green energy, and European Green parties that won 71 seats in 2019 elections won only 52 seats in 2024 European Parliament elections.

After the June 2024 elections, EU leaders proposed to keep conservative Ursula von der Leyen (VDL) as the head of the European Commission for a second term, to make socialist António Costa president of the European Council, and to name Estonian PM Kaja Kallas as the EU’s chief diplomat.

The US economy is growing faster than the EU, prompting analyses of why the EU lags and why US per capita income is 25 percent higher. Analysts complain of too few globally competitive EU businesses and too much EU bureaucracy as well as rising energy costs and more defense spending.

One reason for slower EU growth may be the EU’s aggressive efforts to reduce carbon emissions, increase supply chain transparency, and implement other policies that draw complaints from businesses. National governments promised to maintain fuel and other subsidies to appease protesting farmers and slowed negotiations for free trade agreements that could allow cheaper food imports. About 60 percent of Europe’s electricity is from renewable sources, so further carbon emission reductions must come from agriculture, homes and transportation.

**Britain**

Almost 46,000 asylum seekers arrived by boat over the English Channel in 2022, prompting a UK-Rwanda Migration and Economic Development Partnership. In response, a 2023 law denies asylum to migrants who arrive illegally by boat, and legislation approved in April 2024 allows the UK to send migrants who arrive illegally by boat to their home country or to Rwanda to apply for refugee status.

If found to be in need of protection, migrants who arrive illegally will be resettled in Rwanda. As of June 2024, the UK had paid Rwanda £120 million ($150 million) but sent only two migrants to Rwanda, enticing them with £3,000 departure bonuses. Under the UK-Rwanda partnership, the UK pays Rwanda £151,000 per person to cover housing, food and medical insurance during their first five years in Rwanda.

Rwanda, which says it is hosting 130,000 refugees from neighboring countries, was the scene of a genocide in 1994 during which the majority Hutus killed a million minority Tutsis during a 100-day civil war that ended with Tutsi Paul Kagame taking power and creating the “Switzerland of Africa.”

The 2021 census found that 16 percent of British residents were born outside the country, a higher share of foreign-born than the US. There were three recent waves of migrants to the UK: after WWII from commonwealth countries, after 2004 when Eastern European countries entered the EU, and since Brexit in 2020, when immigrants came from many countries, including India and the Philippines. There are almost 400,000 foreign students in the UK, including half from China, India and Nigeria.

Conservative PM Rishi Sunak was replaced by Labor’s Keir Starmer in July 4, 2024 elections, ending 14 years of Conservative-led governments. Instead of putting the UK on a faster growth path, Brexit slowed business investment as multinationals elected to invest in places with larger regional markets. Conservative-led governments were unable to slow migration to the UK, which contributed to their worst election result in the party’s history. The Conservatives won fewer than 120 seats in the 650 seat Parliament in July 2024, while Labor won over 410 seats. The centrist Liberal Democrats won 72 seats.

Nigel Farage’s anti-immigration Reform UK party won 14 percent of the vote and five seats, and could help to shape Conservative policies on migration. Since Brexit, immigration to the UK as tripled.

**Finland**

Russia is sending Middle Eastern migrants over the 830-mile land border it shares with Finland to retaliate for Finland’s decision to join NATO. Russia invaded in WWII, and Finland retained its independence by ceding eastern lands to Russia.

Finland has only 5.5 million residents, but trains 20,000 new conscripts a year to emphasize fighting in cold weather. Russia has stepped up cyberattacks in Finland, and is installing cameras along its border with Russia.

**France**

President Emmanuel Macron, whose party received fewer votes than the rightist National Rally in EU Parliament elections in June 2024, called for early elections that saw the left-wing parties of the New Popular Front emerge as the strongest force in the 577-member Parliament with
178 seats in July 2024 elections, followed by Macron’s centrist coalition with 150 seats.

The anti-immigration National Rally party won 142 seats after the left and centrist parties forged a “Republican front” to prevent National Rally candidates from splitting the vote and winning three-person runoff races.

Tire maker Michelin, which employs 132,000 workers in 131 factories in 26 countries, in April 2024 promised “decent wages” to all employees, following the lead of L’Oréal. A sixth of all French workers earn the minimum wage of €1,766 a month, making France one of the countries with a high share of workers who earn only the minimum wage. Half of French workers earn less than €2,100 a month after taxes.

The Swiss-based Fair Wage Network a decent wage is having money left over after paying for housing and living expenses for extra goods or leisure.

Germany

Germany is increasing deportations and signing agreements with countries including Georgia and Kenya to return migrants from these countries. Instead of cash benefits, asylum applicants receive stored-value cards that can be used for food and clothing to discourage them from sending cash to relatives at home.

The surging rightist Alternative for Germany (AfD) polled second to the CDU-CSU until spring 2024, when scandals threatened to turn the AfD into a regional party that is strongest in the former East Germany. Polls found support for the AfD dropped from 25 percent to 15 percent by summer 2024. Efforts to ban the AfD are unlikely to succeed despite “militant democracy” provisions in the 1949 constitution based on the experience of the Weimar Republic, when the government could not prevent the rise of the Nazis.

Germany is a manufacturing powerhouse, producing cars and machine tools whose quality is recognized worldwide. However, China is moving up the value chain, threatening some German firms but not affecting others, which threatens to disrupt Team Germany. Germany is a country of regulations, drawing protests from business about the increasing costs of compliance. There are an estimated 375 official databases, many of which require businesses to submit data to European, federal, state, and local governments.

Should the countries supporting Ukraine confiscate Russian assets held in their countries to support Ukraine? The US says yes, but Germany and Japan, which face reparations claims from WWII aggression, say no. Instead, Germany says that Russian assets abroad should be frozen and used to persuade Russia to give up Ukrainian territory it seized in peace negotiations.

Greece

The so-called PIGS, Portugal, Italy, Greece and Spain, were economic laggards during and after the 2008-09 recession, but are now growing faster than Germany, which had to make a difficult transition away from Russian energy and reliance on exports to China. Germany has an economy in 2024 that is about the same size as in 1999.

The PIGS combined are a quarter of the Euro-area economy or the equivalent of Germany. They reduced government spending and debts and deregulated labor markets, attracted local and foreign investment, and accelerated economic growth. Tourism accounts for 10 percent of the economies of the PIGS.

Greece attracted over 32 million foreign tourists in 2023 for its historic treasures and for sunny beaches. However, Greeks and tourists complain of overdevelopment in many areas, especially as hotels and bars creep onto the sand that should be available to all. The EU’s Natura program, which aims to protect vulnerable natural habitats, designated 200 pristine beaches in Greece in 2024 that the government pledged to protect from commercial development.

Italy

Italy received 158,000 asylum seekers in 2023, and PM Giorgia Meloni is pushing EU borders outward by signing agreements with Albania, Egypt and Tunisia to reduce the arrival of unauthorized migrants who use small boats to reach Italy. Meloni’s government enacted laws that require asylum seekers to be detained until decisions are made on their applications.

Meloni leads the populist anti-immigrant Brothers of Italy party that has been in the forefront of efforts to slow the implementation of EU green policies that are opposed by farmers. By appealing to her base on cultural issues such as opposition to Muslims while pursuing mainstream economic and foreign policies, Meloni has gained credibility with EU leaders. Her coalition won almost half of the vote in June 2024 EU Parliament elections.

Netherlands

Amsterdam in April 2024 announced that new hotels that add to the city’s number of beds would be banned; new hotels can only replace the beds that are lost when hotels close. The goal of the no-new-beds policy is to limit the number of overnight hotel guests to less than 20 million a year and to curb rowdy parties, especially of young men. The cruise ship terminal was moved away from the city center in 2023.

Spain

Spain announced plans to end its residence-by-investment program
in April 2024, which gave non-EU foreigners the right to live in the country if they invested at least €500,000 in real estate. Almost 15,000 residence visas were issued, half to Chinese citizens, before protests from Spaniards who could not afford to buy houses and condos due to Airbnb and foreigners seeking residence visas led to the program’s demise.

Portugal in 2024 tightened its similar residence-by-investment program after attracting $6 billion in real estate investment, and Ireland in 2023 ended a program that provided residence in exchange for a €1 million investment to reduce money laundering by Russians. Greece continues to offer golden visas that are often bought by Chinese citizens, but Greece raised the minimum real estate investment from €500,000 to €800,000 in Athens and on popular islands including Mykonos and Santorini.

Australia in 2024 ended a program that granted residence visas in exchange for A$5 million investments.

Russia

President Vladimir Putin has used his 25 years in power to remake Russia into an autocracy bent on upending the post WWII liberal order based on democracy and free trade. After invading Ukraine in February 2022, Putin mobilized pro-war activists under the Z symbol and blacklisted dissidents, modified schooling to reflect threats to the Motherland (all areas with Russian-speaking people), and boosted traditional values and the Orthodox church.

Putin took power in 2000, and was popular during his first two decades in power as the rising price of oil and gas allowed government spending to increase. During the 2020s, Putin contrasted a Russia returning to its roots by encouraging women to have more children to “decadent” Western European nations that increased freedom for women and minorities and saw birthrates decline. Russia gained 2.5 million people by annexing Crimea in 2014, bringing its population to 146 million (compared to 44 million in Ukraine).

To boost birthrates, Russian fathers with four or more children are exempt from conscription to fight in Ukraine.

Putin often invokes Russian sacrifices of WWII, the Great Patriotic War that led to the defeat of Nazi Germany Putin sees himself as the fourth great Russian leader, after Peter the Great, Catherine the Great and Stalin. Russia’s war economy operates with the support of China, which sends consumer goods and war materials to Russia, so that over 60 percent of the new cars sold in Russia in 2023 were made in China. Russia and China view the US as their major strategic threat.

China

The Chinese economy continues to produce and export manufactured goods, including EVs and solar panels, prompting EU and US threats to impose tariffs on Chinese imports even as both the EU and US aim to transform their economies.

The EU and US lost manufacturing jobs to China after China joined the WTO in 2001, and want to avoid a second China shock as Chinese factories maintain their dominance in low-value goods such as furniture and move up the value chain to export goods such as EVs and solar panels that are priorities for the EU and US.

China can remain the world’s factory because of low-cost loans that enable producers to install robots and remain competitive. China exported over five million cars in 2023, more than any other country, three-fourths with gas engines, delivering them with the world’s largest fleet of car-carrying ships. China wants to export goods to maintain jobs and economic growth and counter a drop in construction linked to the overbuilding of apartments.

Chinese developers, home buyers and real-estate agents ignored signs of a housing bubble and continued to build more condos over the past decade, assuming that the Chinese government would not allow the real estate market to crash. Many Chinese buy extra condos as a form of investment, leaving units empty and anticipating rising prices. Chinese have three-fourths of their savings in housing, compared with a third in the US.

In 2020, the total value of Chinese homes and those being built topped $52 trillion, four times China’s GDP. In summer 2024, over 50 Chinese developers were bankrupt, leaving 20 million unfinished housing units and contributing to falling home prices.

India

Almost a billion Indians voted to give the BJP’s PM Narendra Modi Hindu nationalist party a third term in office in May-June 2024 elections. Modi’s BJP won in part by demonizing India’s 200 million Muslims. India is second only to Indonesia in the number of Muslims, who have not benefited from economic growth as much as Hindus since Modi took office in 2014.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is using its oil wealth to build a $500 billion, 105-mile long and 1.2-mile-wide skyscraper city known as Neom or the line with seven billion square feet of floor space, more than New York City. The first 1.5 miles of Neom, expected to be completed by 2030, is expected to house 200,000 people in the world’s largest building as measured by square footage.
Historically, cities have developed outward from a core rather than in a linear fashion.

**ANZ**

The Pacific Australia Labor Mobility (PALM) program allows Pacific Islanders to fill seasonal farm jobs and year-round jobs in agriculture, food processing and tourism. The number of PALM workers employed in short-term farm jobs fell over 10 percent between 2023 and 2024, likely due to the higher cost of PALM workers and the increased availability of Working Holiday Makers (WHMs). WHMs are foreign youth who pay their own travel costs to Australia, and there were over 175,000 in FY22-23.

By doing three months work in rural areas in their first year in Australia, WHMs get a second-year visa to work for any Australian employer, and six months of rural work in the second year leads to a third-year visa.

PALM migrants outnumbered WHMs in 2021-22 and 2022-23, but that reversed in 2023-24, when the 25,000 WHMs outnumbered the 24,000 seasonal PALM migrants. Beginning in 2024, farm employers must guarantee seasonal PALM migrants, but not WHMs, 30 hours of work a week.

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**GLOBAL: DEMOGRAPHY**

The UN estimated that the world’s total fertility rate, the average number of babies per woman, fell from 4.9 in 1950 to 2.3 in 2021. A TFR of 2.1 keeps a population stable because some children die; the US TFR is 1.6, and Korea’s TFR is 0.6. One exception to declining fertility is sub-Saharan Africa, where three-fourths of women do not use modern contraceptives.

Some believe the world is on the brink of a demographic winter. The current world population of 8.3 billion may peak at 9.5 billion in 2060 before declining as parents around the world choose to spend more time and money on fewer children.

The world economy may be headed for the tepid 20s, a period of slow economic growth as governments struggle to spend more on defense despite aging populations and stable or shrinking workforces. Many rich countries are trying to decouple from China and promote selected industries such as renewable energy and critical technologies, which may shuffle supply chains and raise costs to consumers.

Many developing countries have high public debts, an estimated $9 trillion after governments took on loans to build infrastructure and to cope with covid. This means that they have little capacity to borrow more money to improve roads and bridges and to spend more on education and health care.

One common thread in policy is a turn inward. Instead of embracing free trade and markets, more governments are stressing security and resilience to justify supporting local industries, even if the result is higher consumer prices. Most economists warn that governments are likely to get industrial policies wrong, and that spending taxpayer money on politically favored industries will distort national and global economies.

**Development**

East Asian countries such as China raised per capita incomes by moving farmers to factories and exported manufactured goods. Private investment created year-round and higher wage jobs, and government provided the infrastructure for export-led growth, and today China produces a third of the world’s manufactured goods.

Bangladesh has been on the Chinese development path, attracting rural women to sew garments in cities that are exported. However, some Bangladeshi garment factories are automating hand tasks, raising the question of how long low-wage garments can provide jobs for Bangladeshis.

India has call centers that morphed into capability centers to handle accounting and cybersecurity for multinationals. Tata Consultancy Services, Wipro, and Infosys developed business models that rely on a relative handful of high-wage IT professionals embedded in client firms abroad and thousands more lower-wage workers in Indian cities such as Bengaluru (Bangalore) to support them. The question is whether service-led growth can fuel job-creating development.

**Africa**

Nigeria is Africa’s most populous country, with 230 million people whose median age is 18. The per capita income is $2,000, or $6,000 at PPP, but almost 100 million people are considered poor. Corruption, abrupt changes to regulations, and the declining value of the naira deter foreign investors, and 90 percent of Nigerians have informal jobs. Nigeria gets over 90 percent of its foreign exchange from selling oil, and oil revenues are often captured by corrupt elites.

South Africans in May 2024 gave the African National Congress 40 percent of the vote, the first time since 1994 that the ANC did not win majority support. Instead of delivering widespread prosperity to the Rainbow Nation, the ANC pursued policies that benefitted elite Blacks, especially under President Jacob Zuma (2009-18). High unemployment, shortages of electricity and water, and rampant crime soured voters on the ANC. The MK party led by Zuma was the second-largest vote getter in May 2024, followed...
by the Democratic Alliance that is strongest around Capetown.

Food has long been used as a weapon in war, as with efforts in Ethiopia, Sudan and Yemen to starve the enemy and their supporters. During the 1970s, when the US was a major food exporter, there were proposals to withhold US food exports from countries that violated international norms, as with the US grain embargo on the USSR in 1980 after the Afghanistan invasion. Some call for a new treaty that bans the use of food as a weapon of war, but such a treaty appears unlikely to win consensus or to be implemented easily.

Some 800,000 Rwandan Tutsis were murdered by Hutus in 1994, leading to a new regime headed by Tutsi President Paul Kagame, who has remained Rwanda’s leader for the three decades since the genocide. Tutsis dominate the government and military leadership, even though Hutus are 85 percent of Rwandans. Rwanda’s economy has expanded rapidly under Kagame, who is accused by critics of becoming an authoritarian leader who silences critics.

EU laws that went into effect in 2024 aim to ensure that supply chains are free of forced labor and do not destroy rainforests; these laws force growers of cocoa, palm oil and coffee to use smartphones to document where and how these crops are grown. The Ivory Coast has about 1.5 cocoa farms, and NGOs are helping farmers to map their trees to prove that rainforest was not cleared to plant the cocoa trees. The database to receive farmer-provided documentation is still in development.

**Trafficking**

How many people are trafficked for sex or labor? The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 was motivated in part by estimates that 700,000 to two million women and children were being trafficked around the world each year, and 50,000 to 27 million were trapped in modern-day slavery. Australia-based Walk Free and the ILO suggest that there were 50 million people in modern-day slavery in 2022; the 50 million estimate based on a variety of data sources, media reports, and methodologies.

DOS has an Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons, HHS has an Office of Trafficking in Persons (OTIP), and DOJ publishes an annual report on US government efforts to combat trafficking.

Many migrants cross the Sahara Desert to reach North African ports and then attempt to reach Europe in small boats. The trip across the Sahara is dangerous, with some women subject to sexual demands and some migrants forced into criminal activities. Traffickers and smugglers lie to migrants about the risks of crossing the Sahara in overloaded trucks, and often demand more money once migrants are far from home.

Some 75,000 migrants crossed the Mediterranean in the first six months of 2024, and at least 750 died or are missing at sea. The death and missing rate is higher for migrants crossing the Sahara.

**Other**

**California: Ag Robots**

Can hand harvesters be replaced by machines? California employs an average 425,000 hired farm workers. However, due to seasonality and turnover, some 850,000 people are employed on the state’s farms each year.

The demand for farm labor has been stable while the supply of settled farm workers shrinks, putting upward pressure on farm labor costs. California’s minimum wage is $16 an hour, while the AEWR is $19.75. Laws that require overtime on an 8/40 basis, paid sick and other leave, and required trainings further raise farm labor costs.

Replacing hand harvesters is hard because people perform several tasks when harvesting an apple or strawberry. Workers detect ripe fruit and vegetables, position themselves to pick it, detach it, and convey what is picked to a bin or box. There are no reliable data on the share of ripe produce that is detected, picked, and conveyed by hand workers, but growers assume humans pick 95 percent or more of marketable produce.

Breaking down the four tasks of detection, positioning, detaching and conveying, highlights the challenge facing robots. If a robot is 95 percent efficient at each of these tasks, its overall efficiency is 81 percent or 15 percent less than hand harvesters. Achieving 95 percent robot efficiency in the face of plant foliage, plant stems and limbs, dust and other field conditions is very difficult.

Efficiency is the share of ripe produce detected and harvested, while speed is the second challenge. Humans pick an apple or strawberry every two to three seconds depending on yield and the condition of the field or orchard. Most robots are slower, although their ability to operate 24/7 may help to compensate for slower speeds.

**Berries**

Driscoll’s is an IP and marketing firm that dominates the production and sale of US raspberries and blackberries, and accounts for growing shares of US strawberry and blueberry sales. Most of the $9 billion worth of berries sold each year to consumers are bred for yield and hardiness, but Driscoll’s Sweetest Batch varieties are bred for sweetness and flavor. Organic berries cost 30 percent more than
conventional berries, and Sweetest Batch berries are often 30 percent more than organic.

Breeding berries means weighing tradeoffs between taste, yield, and hardiness to pests as well as the ability of berries to maintain their sweetness during the trip to market. Driscoll’s develops berry varieties that its 900 independent growers in 20 countries produce and market via Driscoll’s. Some 200 varieties a year are tested by Driscoll’s, which releases only one new variety each year across the four major berries to its growers.

California is expecting a record 75-million-pound blueberry crop from 9,000 acres, including 53 million pounds for the fresh market. Almost half of California blueberries are organic. The grower price of fresh blueberries can be as high as $5 a pound, compared to $0.50 for blueberries that are frozen or processed into foods.

**U.S. Ag**


USDA wants to promote the viability of small farmers by enabling them to sell carbon credits and renewable energy in addition to crops and livestock. The US has two million farms, and the largest 105,000 account for 80 percent of farm sales.

Each American had 155 pounds of fresh and 115 pounds of processed vegetables available in 2023, plus 118 pounds of potatoes. US-produced fresh vegetables were worth $15 billion, processed vegetables were worth $3 billion, and potatoes were worth $6 billion. The US exported fresh vegetables worth $2.4 billion and imported fresh vegetables worth $11.4 billion in 2023.

Fresh vegetables were produced on 2.4 million US acres in 2022, led by California with 1.1 million acres. The leading fresh vegetables by per capita availability were lettuce, 33 pounds; onions, 21 pounds; and tomatoes, 19 pounds.

The US had 5.2 million bearing acres of fruits and nuts in 2023, including 2.8 million acres of tree nuts; 1.5 million acres of deciduous fruits, 600,000 acres of citrus; and 350,000 acres of other fruits, including avocados, blueberries and strawberries.

About 15 percent of consumer spending on fruits and vegetables is for organic produce, usually defined as fruits and vegetables grown without synthetic fertilizers or chemicals.

Bird flu (H5N1) was detected in US milk after a sick bird likely transmitted the flu to dairy cows early in late 2023 in the Texas panhandle, and in dairy cows in other states. Bird flu kills birds and turn’s cow milk thick and yellowy. The US developed a plan after the 9/11 attacks to ensure that pasteurization kills both botulism neurotoxin, a lethal pathogen, and bird flu. Health officials warned people to avoid raw milk, which some people believe is healthier than pasteurized milk.

USDA in April 2024 mandated the testing of lactating dairy cows that are moved over state lines to prevent the spread of bird flu. Cattle and hogs are crammed onto trucks for transport, allowing disease to spread during transit and at auctions. Some advocate a national tracking system for individual animals so that disease outbreaks are easier to track.

Some 11,500 greenhouse operations with 135 million square feet produced vegetables and herbs worth $1 billion in 2022; over half of the square footage was devoted to tomatoes in facilities led by Ohio, Kentucky, and New York. The three leading states for square feet under glass were California, 30 percent; Ohio, seven percent; and Texas, six percent.

USDA calls indoor farming controlled environment agriculture (CEA), and includes in CEA greenhouses, shade houses, vertical agriculture, hydroponics, and aquaponics. USDA counted 3,000 US CEA operations in 2019, and reported that the major CEA commodities were tomatoes, lettuce, and cucumbers.

**Food, Wine**

Food prices rose during covid when many people worked remotely, raising the demand for food at home, while supply chain disruptions raised supplier costs. The average price of a basket of items commonly purchased in supermarkets rose by 36 percent between spring 2019 and spring 2024, with snacks, drinks and poultry among the items whose prices increased the most over five years.

Rising prices are increasing the demand for private-label food and snacks that cost less than nationally advertised brands. One poll found that Walmart’s Great Value brand was the highest rated by consumers, followed by the Aldi and Amazon Aplenty brands. Walmart added a Bettergoods private label in 2024.

Walmart sells a quarter of US groceries, followed by Kroger with 10 percent and Albertsons with six percent. The average grocery spend per week rose from about $100 in 2019 to $165 in 2024.

Fast food has been considered a cheap and less healthy choice for food, but with menu prices up an average 60 percent over the past decade, surveys find that 80
percent of Americans who earn less than $30,000 a year see fast-food as a luxury. Fast food prices rose during Covid and supply chain snarls, and then rose more when states and cities raised their minimum wages. Many fast-food outlets add suggested tips, further increasing costs to consumers.

How much effort should be made to persuade obese and overweight people to lose weight. The Health at Every Size movement that began in the 1960s wants to reduce food shaming, the belief among overweight people that they must lose weight to be socially acceptable. The anti-diet movement says that all foods have value, which worries health professionals who emphasize that many chronic diseases are linked to obesity, diabetes, and liver disease.

Dynamic pricing is used by hotels, airlines, and other firms to charge customers more for services that are in high demand, such as business hotel rooms during the week. Bars offer happy hours and restaurants early-bird specials to attract patrons earlier in the evening. Wendy’s effort to charge more for its Breakfast Baconator when demand was highest was quickly abandoned.

Firms such as PROS develop software that allows firms to adjust prices in response to consumer demand, as with Uber’s surge pricing. So-called personalized pricing aims to charge higher prices to those who are willing to pay the most, prompting some supermarkets to charge higher prices in stores in wealthier areas. Firms such as Walmart shun coupons that give discounts to those who take the time to collect and present them.

There are 40 US fast-food chains with more than 500 outlets that serve 85 million customers on a typical day. McDonalds and other chains made commercials that featured celebrities ordering their favorite meals, enabling consumers to believe that they were enjoying a meal loved by celebrities.

US restaurant sales were a record $11 trillion in 2023. However, rising expenses are squeezing profit margins, contributing to the bankruptcy of Red Lobster, the largest US seafood restaurant chain with 650 units in May 2024. A Red Lobster all-you-can eat shrimp deal backfired and increased losses for Thai Union, which wrote off its 2016 investment of $575 million in Red Lobster.

Oliver Garden is the largest casual US restaurant chain, with over 900 locations and over $5 billion in sales in 2023. Texas Roadhouse is second, with 650 locations and almost $5 billion in sales. These chains are followed by Applebee’s with 1,500 units and $4.5 billion in sales, Chili’s with 1,200 units and $4 billion, and Buffalo Wild Wings with 1,250 units and $4 billion in sales.

USDA in April 2024 announced regulations that aim to reduce added sugars in federally subsidized breakfasts and lunches toward the 10 percent dietary guidelines and to limit sodium to 1,500 milligrams for breakfast and lunch combined. Flavored milk, a major source of added sugar, is allowed if it satisfies sugar limits. USDA reimburses schools up to $4.30 for the 30 million meals served to students. School cafeterias say that they spend half of their budgets on food and a third on labor costs.

The Food and Drug Administration may require food manufacturers to add green, yellow and red labels to the front of food packages to warn consumers about the level of salt, sugar, and fat. Mexico and other countries mandate front stop-sign type warning labels that studies show lead to healthier food choices.

USDA funds food stamps or SNAP benefits, and delivers them with EBT stored value cards that are vulnerable to scammers who use skimming devices and hidden cameras to collect the information on the card and the user’s PIN and then drain the benefits in the account. EBT cards do not have chips, and SNAP beneficiaries often buy from smaller stores that may cooperate with scammers.

Should genetically modified foods such as golden rice with vitamin A be embraced? The US says yes, and 95 percent of the corn, cotton and soybeans grown in the US are GMO crops that are resistant to the herbicide Roundup. GMO crops can raise yields and reduce carbon emissions, but most environmental groups are opposed to GMOs.

Ultra-processed foods are those made with ingredients that are not found in a typical home kitchen. Most ultra-processed foods begin with normal commodities such as corn or wheat that are broken down and chemically modified. Many include ingredients designed to boost a food’s color, flavor or texture.

Americans buy $14 billion worth of bread each year. Normal bread is flour, water, salt and yeast and resists mold for several days, while ultra-processed bread uses emulsifiers, dough conditioners and other ingredients to remain edible for two to four weeks.

Wine

California produces too much wine. Some 3.9 million tons of wine grapes were crushed in 2023, and at least 400,000 tons were not harvested. California has 610,000 acres of wine grapes, and observers say that 50,000 to 100,000 acres should be removed to balance wine supply and demand.

Napa has 46,000 acres of wine grapes whose Cabernet, Chardonnay and Merlot grapes were worth $1.2 billion in 2023. The largest...
vineyard owners include Silverado Investment and the Laird family, each with 2,500 acres. Gallo owns about 1,500 acres of vineyards in Napa; Constellation 1,200 acres; and Beckstoffer 1,000 acres. Treasury Wine Estates buys and sometimes farms grapes on 2,600 acres in Napa, but the vineyards are owned by others.

Australia has too much wine, especially South Australia. Accolade, one of the largest vintners, offered some of its growers $4,000 per hectare to remove vineyards. Federal and state governments are also offering assistance until wine exports to China restart.

The world’s eight billion people drink two billion cups of coffee every day. Each Arabica tree produces one or two pounds of coffee beans a year, so a two-cup-a-day habit requires the beans from about 20 trees for a year’s supply of coffee. With coffee plantations in Brazil and elsewhere threatened by climate change, start ups are developing synthetic coffee and cocoa made from date seeds and other plant waste.

Some believe that more foods will be made using bioreactors, steel vats that use sugars to grow the plant cells that are seeded in the vat. Just has high-priced butter led to margarine in the late 1800s, some believe that there will be more substitute foods developed as climate change makes “real foods” more expensive.

Climate Change
Heavy rainfall led to floods in many areas of the world in Spring 2024, testing infrastructure that may be unable to cope with a hotter and wetter world. When five to 10 inches of rain fall in a single day, as in Dubai on April 15, 2024, there is widespread flooding and damage. The Indian Ocean Dipole pushed warmer water toward Eastern Africa in 2024, leading to flooding in Kenya and other Eastern African countries.

Metro Mexico City (CDMX) has 23 million residents and not enough water, joining Cape Town, São Paulo and Chennai among major world cities facing water crises. Mexicans lead in consumption of bottled water per capita, reflecting distrust of public water systems that are often leaky and poorly managed. Two-thirds of Mexico was in drought in spring 2024 before the start of the June to November rainy season.

Delhi had extreme heat in May 2024. Wet-bulb temperature, which measures the amount of heat stress on the human body due to heat and humidity, reached 100F or 38C in Delhi, well above the 90F or 32C thought to be the maximum for human health.

Extreme weather is raising the prices of olive oil, coffee and cocoa. Vietnam’s drought raised the price of Robusta coffee, while heat and rain reduced cocoa production. Italy’s wine production fell to early 1960s level in 2023, and some Bordeaux vineyards have stopped removing grape leaves in order to protect the grapes from too much sun.

The European Court of Human Rights in April 2024 ruled that Switzerland violated the European Convention on Human Rights by not doing enough to slow climate change. The case, brought by a group of women known as KlimaSeniorinnen, alleged that the Swiss government’s failure to reduce greenhouse gas emissions violated their rights because they were vulnerable to heat-related illnesses.

How widespread is green washing, advertising goods and services as climate friendly or neutral when they are not? Some environmental groups are challenging firms’ environmental claims, arguing that their goods and services are not as carbon neutral or climate friendly as they claim.
FIGURE: FOREIGN BORN U.S. RESIDENTS

CPS data suggest that the foreign-born population was 50 million or 15 percent of US residents at the end of 2023, including 12 million unauthorized foreigners. There were 44 million foreign born US residents in 2020, including 10 million unauthorized foreigners.

The foreign-born include 12 million Mexican-born US residents; 5.4 million people born in the Caribbean; 4.8 million born in Central America; and 4.3 million born in South America. Some 8.2 million immigrants were born in East Asia and 4.3 million were born on the Indian subcontinent. There were 4.5 million US residents who were born in Europe and 750,000 who were born in Canada.

![Chart showing foreign-born population trends from 1850 to 2023.](image-url)