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Rising selectivity of Israeli immigrants to the United States, 1976–2017

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ABSTRACT

The selectivity of immigrants largely depends on economic returns to skills. Since the 1970s the rising income inequality in the US relative to Israel, an indicator of greater returns to skills in the former, implies the intensification of the positive selectivity of Israeli immigrants in the US in recent decades, especially among the highly skilled. To test this hypothesis, we compared the education and income of four successive cohorts of Israeli immigrants relative to two benchmark groups—the Israeli population from which immigrants were drawn and the US population they joined. The results, based on analyzing Israeli Labor Force Surveys and US Census and ACS data from 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2015, support the hypothesis: the gaps in educational levels between successive cohorts of 'recent' Israeli-born Jewish immigrants (those who resided in the US for no more than 5 years) and the Israel-born Jewish population from which they were drawn, grew larger over time. Income analyses relative to US benchmark groups, both income ratios and quintile regressions, suggest that the labor market skills of successive cohorts of Israeli immigrants in the US have improved, not only on education, but also on some unobserved traits enhancing income. Moreover, as expected by the theory, the rise in the selectivity of successive cohorts of Israeli immigrants was the greatest among the most skilled immigrants—those located at the 90th percentile of their cohort's income distribution and aspiring to join the very top of income receivers in the US.

1. Introduction

Due to Israel's unique ideology and demographic concerns, Jewish emigration from Israel (and declines in immigration) has long been viewed as a social and political problem, threatening the Jewish majority in Israel, and in fact the very survival of the Jewish state (e.g., Kass and Lipset, 1982). It is therefore not surprising that the "emigration problem" has generated much public discussion, a vast literature, both scholarly and popular, as well as government-sponsored policy reports. In the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, much of this literature focused on the "severity of the problem" aiming to estimate how many emigrated, why they left and what could bring them back (Cohen, 2011). In the late 1990s, after nearly one million immigrants arrived in Israel from the former Soviet Union, the discussion around emigration shifted to focus more on the type of emigrants than on their volume. In the 21st century, the worry has been that Israel has experienced nothing less than a "brain drain," as recent emigrants, more than their predecessors, have been

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disproportionately drawn from the ranks of highly educated and highly skilled Israelis, thereby depleting Israel of its most valuable resource, human capital (Ben David, 2008, 2019; Aspril, 2012; Detel, 2013; Fischer, 2019; Gould and Moav, 2007; Klingbail and Shiloh, 2012; Maital, 2013).

Using the terminology of migration studies in sociology and economics (Waters and Pineau, 2015; Jasso and Rosenzweig, 1990), this brain-drain argument is about *changes* in the self-selection or selectivity of emigrants from Israel. In other words, the main hypothesis of the Israeli brain drain argument is not merely that Israeli emigrants are positively selected on their educational levels and skills – this has been well established by virtually all past research on Israelis living abroad (Cohen, 1996, 2011; Gold, 2002; Rebhun and Lev Ari, 2010; d'Aiglepierre, 2020) and recently by a Central Bureau of Statistics publication (CBS, 2024a). Rather, the key point of the Israeli brain drain argument is that the positive selectivity of Israeli emigrants has intensified over time.

Some of the research advancing this brain-drain argument explains the rising incentives for high skilled Israelis to emigrate (Gould and Moav, 2007; Ben David, 2008; 2019). However, aside from anecdotal evidence of the rising proportion of Israeli university graduates living abroad between 2013 and 2017 and a rise in the proportion of Israeli physicians working in OECD countries between 2006 and 2016 (Ben David, 2019), the emigration literature has not presented systematic evidence demonstrating the intensification of the selectivity of highly skilled Israeli emigrants over time.

This paper aims to contribute to this topic by testing the empirical status of Israel's brain drain hypothesis, with respect to Israeli immigrants in the US, considered to be the preferred destination for Israeli 'soaring brains' (Weisberg, 2013). To detect changes in the selectivity of Israeli emigrants to the US, we estimate the skills of successive cohorts of Israeli-born Jewish immigrants in the US, from 1976 to 2017. We focus on the US because it is by far the largest destination country for Israelis, particularly for Israeli-born Jewish emigrants, with an estimated two-thirds residing there (Cohen, 2011).[1] Consequently, the US is the only country for which high quality data on Israeli immigrants are readily available for sufficiently large samples. We end our analyses in 2017 because the next cohort of Israeli emigrants, arriving in the US between 2018 and 2022, was affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, complicating comparisons with earlier cohorts.

Since 2017, however, much has occurred in Israel in addition to Covid-19. In January 2023 the newly elected Israeli government embarked on a judicial overhaul leading to mass protests by hundreds of thousands of Israelis, primarily liberal and secular, calling it a 'judicial coup.' Ten months later, in October 2023, Hamas attacked Southern Israel triggering a war between Israel and several of its enemies. These events whose end is not in sight, have implications for both the number of Israeli emigrants and their types. While our main empirical analysis concludes at 2017, we will provide in an epilogue the information on what is known on Israeli emigration since the onset of the judicial overhaul.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: the next section briefly addresses emigration rates from Israel, presenting both flow and stock estimates for recent years. Section 3 discusses the theory leading to our main hypothesis, namely, that the positive selectivity on skills have increased over time among successive cohorts of Israeli emigrants to the US. Section 4 presents the data and the method we use to test the hypothesis and section 5 presents the results, including some international comparisons. The final section provides a brief discussion of the results, ending with an epilogue on emigration trends since January 2023.

2. Are Israeli emigration rates exceptionally high or rising?

Since the late 1980s, emigration rates have increased, largely due to the influx of nearly a million immigrants that arrived in Israel from the former Soviet Union since 1989. In addition to the newcomers from the former Soviet Union, whose emigration rate was, as expected, much higher than that of Israeli natives,[2] other factors have contributed to rising emigration rates in the 1990s and early 2000s. These include an economic recession in 1996–97, increasing terrorism in the second half of the 1990s, and in particular the second Palestinian Intifada in the early 2000s, which not only resulted in the deaths of about one thousand Jews (and over 3000 Palestinians), but also triggered the worse economic recession in Israel's history (Zeira, 2021).

Furthermore, at the turn of the 21st century, for the first time, many foreign-born Israelis of European ancestry and their Israeli-born offspring began applying for citizenship in European countries that were already part of, or soon to be part of, the European Union. According to sociologist Yossi Harpaz, between 2000 and 2017 over 85,000 new European passports were issued to Israeli Jews by Germany, Poland, Hungary, Romania, Greece, Austria, Bulgaria and the Czech Republic (Harpaz, 2019). In addition, between 2015 and 2024 Portugal and Spain granted over 40,000 EU citizenships to Israelis of Mizrahi ancestry (Harpaz, personal communication); in Portugal, thousands of applications are still pending. To be sure, most of the dual Israeli-European citizens have neither emigrated nor expressed intentions to emigrate to any of these countries. Rather, they are seeking 'insurance' for themselves and for their children in case the political and economic situation in Israel deteriorates, while also keeping the door open for their children to study and work in Europe (Harpaz, 2019). Notwithstanding the intentions of Israelis with European citizenship, it is possible that at least some of them

[1] Accoridng to US data obtained from the 5 % Public Use Microdata (PUMS) of the US Cesnuses, the number of Israeli-born Jews of all ages in the US was about 48,000 in 1980, 80,000 in 1990, and 100,000 in 2000. Accoridng to data obtained from the 1 % American Community Surveys (ACS), the number rose to about 128,000 in 2010 and to 153,000 in 2017. See Cohen and Haberfeld (1997) for the algorithm for identifying Israeli-born Jews in the PUMS and ACS.

[2] Emigration rates of native-born are lower than those of new immigrants, mainly because new immigrants are less integrated in their new coutnry hence their 'cost' of emigration, either back to their birth countries or to third countries, is lower than the cost for natives. During 1990–2005, about 10 % of immigrants arriving in Israel in the 1990s emigrated, compared to 2 % among native-born Israelis and those who immigrated to Israel before 1990 (CBS, 2007).

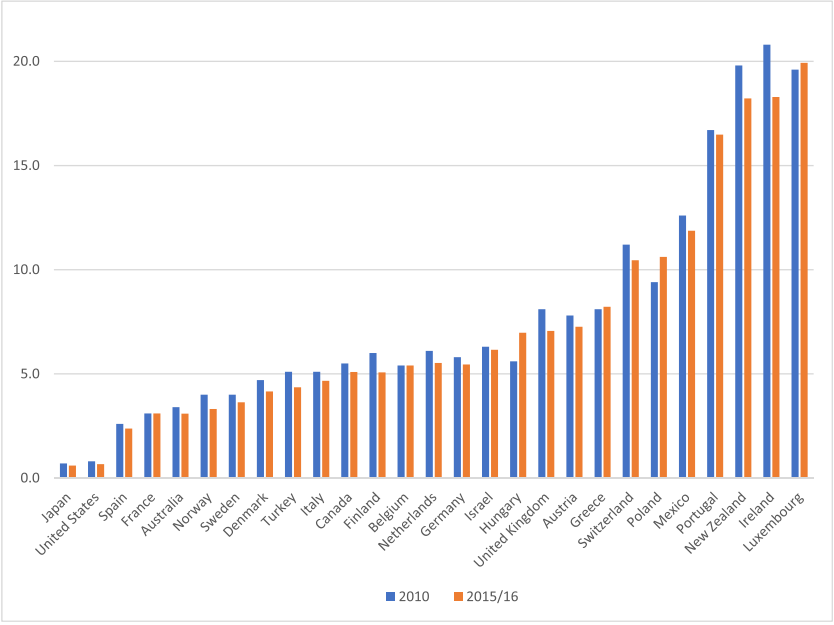

Fig. 1. Percent native-born emigrants 15 years and over residing in OECD countries in 2010 and 2015/16.
Sources: d'Aiglepierre et al., 2020 (for 2015/16), OECD 2015 (for 2010)

have emigrated in recent years. This trend of native Israelis seeking dual citizenship—along with the declining number of Jewish immigrants coming to Israel since the 2000s (Lustick 2011)—has arguably heightened anxiety within the Israeli population, raising concerns about losing young Israelis not only to North America and Australia but also to the European Union.

Some of the concerns regarding emigration was alleviated by Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS) estimates showing a sharp decline in the emigration rate, from 3.1 emigrants per 1000 in the population in 2001, the peak year of the second intifada, to about 1.6 in 2005 (CBS, 2007) and around 1.0 during 2009–2021 (CBS, 2021).[3] Even more telling than the flow data provided by the Israeli CBS is the stock data published by the OECD, showing that the proportion of Israeli-born emigrants residing in OECD countries is not substantially greater than the proportion of emigrants born in many other OECD countries. In 2000, the share of Israeli-born emigrants residing in OECD countries (5.8 % of the Israeli-born population) was slightly above the OECD median (4.9 %) but lower than that of 11 OECD countries (Cohen, 2011). In 2010 and 2015/16 (Fig. 1), the gaps narrowed further: the share of Israeli-born individuals residing in OECD countries (6.3 % and 6.2 %, respectively) was only slightly above the OECD median for foreign-born populations residing in OECD countries (5.8 % and 5.5 %, respectively).[4] Similarly, a recent comprehensive report, using data from 45 destination countries for Israelis, estimated that around 2022, 6 % of the Israeli-born population (328,000 persons) resided outside Israel (Staetsky, 2025). In sum, there is no evidence that emigration rates from Israel have increased in recent years, at least not until 2021, nor that the stock of Israelis abroad is exceptionally high or has been rising relative to other rich countries. Evidently, it is not the number of emigrants that concerns Israel, but their skills – the topic to which we now turn.

3. Selectivity of emigrants, Theoretical Considerations

Much of the Israeli emigration literature attributes the flight of high skilled Israelis to economic factors. These include in Israel a poor K-12 educational system, inadequate healthcare, and, in particular, a high cost of living combined with low wages and high-income taxes, especially at the top of the income distribution. According to data presented by Israeli economist Dani Ben David (2019), the income tax burden on Israeli workers belonging to the top 20 % of income receivers has increased between 2000 and 2017

[3] Until 2021, annual emigration, called "emigration balance" has been calculated by the CBS as the number of Israeli residents (both foreign born and native born) leaving Israel in a given year for at least a year, minus the number of Israelis returning to Israel after a stay of at least a year abraod. Emigration rate for a given year is the emigration balance divided by average population size. Starting in 2022, the CBS implemented methodological changes that led to a sigificant increase in annual emigration balance (CBS, 2024a). The emigration rate for persons who left Israel in 2022 is 2.8 compared to around 1.0 during the 2010s. However, it remains unclear what portion of this increase is due to the methodological changes.

[4] The OECD published percentages for 2015/16 (d'Aiglepierre et al., 2020), unlike those for 2000 and 2010, are calculated without excluding foreign-born individuals from the population size in the country of origin (the denominator). This lowers the percentage in countries with a large proportion of foreign born such as Israel. Fortunately, in 2010 the OECD (OECD, 2015) provided percentages of those residing abroad with and without excluding the foreign born from the denominator, thereby enabling us to adjust the 2015/16 figures to be comparable to the 2000 and 2010 figures.

and is greater than the respective tax burden in the US. Furthermore, due to rising productivity gap between Israel and the US since 1974, and its accompanying effect on wages, US-Israel income gaps have been growing, especially among the highly educated. These developments, compounded by Israel's relatively high consumer prices, explains Ben David (2019), are expected to incentivize Israelis, especially the highly skilled, to emigrate to the US and other countries. This expectation of the Israeli brain drain argument is consistent with the theory of immigrant selectivity, focusing on returns to skills.

The theory posits that immigrants' (labor market) skills depend, in addition to income levels, on the returns to skills offered in both countries of origin and destination (Borjas, 1987, 1994; Chiswick, 2000). From countries of high-income inequality (a proxy for returns to skills), where skills are generously compensated, the selection of immigrants is negative: the less skilled are those seeking to improve their economic lot by migrating to a more egalitarian country, where they expect to be protected by a net of social services. In contrast, the selection of immigrants from relatively egalitarian countries, where skills are poorly compensated, is positive, as highly skilled workers seek to migrate to labor markets that will reward their skills.

According to the theory, the intensity of the positive selectivity of immigrants primarily depends on the differences in income levels and returns to skills between the destination and origin countries. When all else is equal, greater gaps in returns to skills between the destination and origin country should lead to a more intense positive selectivity of immigrants. Therefore, the theory expects that the sharp increase in income inequality in the US since the late 1970s (World Inequality Database, 2024) should have raised the incentives of high skilled Israelis to emigrate. While income inequality in Israel increased as well during this period (Kristal, 2013; Danieli, Gilat and Leventer, 2024), the rise was steeper in the US, and at each year the income share of the top 1 % reached a higher level in the US than in Israel.[5] This was reflected in the very high incomes at the top 10 % and even more so at the top 1 % of the US income distribution. The gap in top incomes between Israel and the U.S. has likely been exacerbated by the declining taxation of top U.S. incomes over the past few decades (Saez and Zucman, 2019), thereby increasing the emigration incentives for the most skilled Israelis aspiring to join the top income percentiles in the U.S.

Results of past research that compared the educational selectivity of Israeli emigrants in the late 1990s across 24 OECD countries (Cohen, 2011) are consistent with this theory: The US, followed by other English-speaking countries where income inequality is relatively high (Canada, UK, and Australia), attracted Israeli immigrants with the highest educational levels. More egalitarian OECD countries, especially in Scandinavia, had an Israeli population of considerably lower educational levels than that of their counterparts residing in the US.

To be sure, motives for emigration vary and may stem from political, cultural, or job availability issues, rather than solely from differences in incomes and returns to skills. Moreover, income does not capture all the economic disparities between Israel and the US. Changes in the costs and quality of basic services such as education and healthcare may offset changes in returns to skills and income differences between the two countries. While admittedly crude, this economic theory of immigrant selectivity provides a useful guidance and framework for the empirical inquiry presented in the following pages. Accordingly, the analyses aim to estimate whether the positive selectivity of immigrants from Israel to the US has intensified since the late 1970s, particularly among high-skilled Israelis, as expected by this theory.

4. Data and methods

To test for changes in the selectivity of Israeli immigrants in the US we compared the characteristics of successive cohorts of Israeli immigrant relative to two benchmark groups: the Israeli population from which immigrants were drawn and the US population they joined. This is a straightforward method used by most studies aimed at detecting changes in immigrant skills and selectivity (Borjas, 1994; Waters and Pineau, 2015). To this end, we analyzed Israeli Labor Force Surveys from 1980, 1990, 2001 and 2015 that include information on the characteristics of the population from which the Israeli-born immigrants to the US were drawn. In order to estimate the characteristics of Israeli immigrants in the US, we analyzed the 5 % Public Use Samples (PUMS) of the US Census for 1980, 1990 and 2000, as well as a combined 5-year file of the American Community Survey (ASC) for 2013–2017 (hereafter 2015 cohort).[6]

We focus on *recent* immigrants, namely, those arriving in the US in the 5-year period preceding the observation years: 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2013–2017. Thus, the four cohorts of recent immigrants we analyzed arrived in the US in 1976–80, 1986–90, 1996–2000, and 2009–2017, respectively.[7] Consequently, the US data enable us to estimate the characteristics of the four successive immigrant cohorts during the past four decades. The information about their educational level and income, collected 1–5 years after arrival in the US, are indicative of their selectivity, namely of the educational level and overall skills with which they have arrived in the US from Israel, before any meaningful socioeconomic assimilation has occurred in the US.

[5] The share of the top 1 % of income receivers in the US national income rose from 10.4 % in 1980 to 14.7 % in 1990, to 17.3 % in 2000, to 17.9 % in 2010 and to 19.1 % in 2017 (it was stable around 10–11 % in the 1970s) (World Inequality Database, 2024). Data for Israel for the early years (until 2010) are not fully comparable with the US data and fluctuate greatly from year to year. It is therefoer better to look at the averages by decade: the share of the top 1 % in Israel increased from 6 % in the 1970s to 8.8 % in 1980–89, to 9.5 % in 1990–99, and to 12.6 % in 2000–10 (Kristal, 2013). Data comparable to the US are available from 2008 showing that the share of the top 1 % in Israel declined from 14.8 % in 2008 to 13.6 % in 2018 (Danieli, Gilat and Leventer, 2024).

[6] We pooled 5 years of the 1 % ACS surveys to increase the sample size of Israeli-born immigrnats in the US. Thus, all cohorts we analyzed are based on 5 % samples of the Israeli-born in the US population.

[7] The year of arrival of the last cohort spans from 2009 to 2017, to include all immigrnats who came to the US in the 5-year period preceding the survey dates of the 2013–2017 pooled sample.

We limit the analysis to Jewish Israeli-born immigrants who were 25–54 years old during the observation year, who immigrated to the US when they were at least 22 years of age and hence were responsible for their own immigration decision. We focus on Israeli-born immigrants because it is not possible to identify foreign-born Israelis in the US census and the ACS; we excluded Israeli-born Palestinian-Arabs because of their small size,[8] as well as the possibility that they suffer from discrimination in both Israel and also in the US after 9/11, casting doubt on their income as a valid proxy for their skills. After all restrictions, the samples sizes of recent Israeli-born Jewish immigrants in the US used in the analyses are 381, 539, 502, and 594 individuals, for 1980, 1990, 2000 and 2015, respectively (see Appendix A for the number of cases by gender and year used in the education and income analyses).

The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, using various educational levels as indicators for skills, we compare the four immigrant cohorts to Israeli-born Jews in Israel, the Israeli benchmark group. The gaps between the educational level of native Israeli Jews in Israel and their counterparts who emigrated to the US tell us how selective each cohort was; comparing the gaps in 1980, 1990, 2000 and 2015 will tell us if later immigrant cohorts have been more selective on education than earlier cohorts.

In the second stage, using income from work as a broad measure for overall labor market skills, we compare the median income of the four immigrant cohorts to the median incomes of the benchmark groups of non-Hispanic US-born White Americans. To test if selectivity is more positive among the most skilled, we repeat this comparison at the 90th percentile. The rising selectivity hypothesis expects an improvement in the income of successive cohorts of Israeli immigrants relative to the US benchmarks, especially at the 90th percentile of the income distribution, where the most skilled workers are located.

Finally, in the third stage of the empirical analysis, we estimate multivariate quintile regressions to detect immigrants' income advantage (or disadvantage) relative to demographically comparable members of the US benchmark. Here the selectivity hypothesis expects a rising advantage of Israeli immigrants over Americans of the same educational level, age and other measured characteristics, with the anticipation that the rising Israeli advantage will be greater among the top earners, those located at the 90th percentile of the distribution, whose selectivity from Israel is expected to have increased the most.

5. Results

5.1. Educational selectivity

Table 1 presents educational levels of the four cohorts of Israeli-born men and women relative to the education level of Israeli Jews of the same ages who remained in Israel as well as to the US benchmarks. The top panel presents the proportion of those with at least a college degree and the bottom panel the proportion with at least an MA degree. The gap in percentage points between the proportion of each cohort and the Israeli benchmark having a particular educational level represents the intensity of the educational selectivity of the cohort.

Evidently, Israeli immigrants to the U.S. are highly educated compared to both the Israeli and U.S. populations. As early as 1980, 48 % of immigrant men and 39 % of immigrant women had at least a bachelor's degree (BA), while only 22 % of men and 18 % of women who remained in Israel had achieved that level of education. By 2015, 67 % of recent immigrant men and 78 % of recent immigrant women held at least a college degree, compared to 35 % of Israeli men and 47 % of Israeli women.

Recall that the gap in percentage points between immigrants and stayers is indicative of the intensity of the positive selectivity of Israeli immigrants. By this standard, the positive selectivity on education was already substantial in 1980. The gap was about 26 percentage points among men (48–22 = 26) and 21 points among women, and the gaps have increased over time, reaching 31–32 points in 2015.[9] For women, the selectivity intensified the most with the cohort of 1986–90, while for men most of the intensification occurred later, in the cohort arriving in 1996–2000. Although the gap between Israeli immigrants and the US benchmark does not represent selectivity (as one is selected from one's country of origin), Table 1 shows that Israeli immigrants are "hyper-selected" on education (Lee and Zhou, 2015). This means that their educational levels are higher not only than those of the Israeli population, but also higher than those of the US population—a point to which we will return when discussing immigrants' income.

A second indicator for educational selectivity, presented at the bottom panel of Table 1, is the proportion of immigrants and stayers with at least a graduate degree (MA degree or higher, including such degrees as MD, MBA, and PhD). Unfortunately, the Israeli data include information on graduate degrees only from 2001; hence our comparison with the Israeli benchmark, which is the relevant comparison for selectivity, is limited to two points in time, 2000/2001 and 2015. The gaps between immigrants and stayers in holding graduate degrees (MA+) have increased among men from 20 percentage points in 2000 (27-7 = 20) to 24 points in 2015 and among women from 15 points in 2000 to 20 points in 2015. In short, educational selectivity on graduate degrees has intensified between the cohorts arriving in the US during 1996–2000 and 2009–2017.

[8] In 2013–2017 the share of Arabs among all Israeli born in the US was around 12 %, and their share among 'recent' immigrants was only 5 % indicating a decline in the rate of Arab emigration from Israel to the US.

[9] Part of the growing gap in college graduation rates over time between recent immigrants and Israeli-born individuals who remained in Israel could, in principle, be attributed to the fact that immigrants tended to be younger than the population from which they were drawn and were therefore more likely to benefit from the expansion of Israel's higher education system that began in the 1990s. However, since the Israeli benchmark group—Israeli-born Jews—is itself relatively young, the differences in mean age between the immigrant cohorts and their Israeli benchmark groups are relatively small, thereby largely mitigating this potential issue. Specifically, among individuals aged 25–54, the mean ages of recent Israeli-born Jewish immigrants in the U.S. in 1980, 1990, 2000, and 2015 were 31, 34, 34, and 35 years, respectively—only about 1–3 years younger than the corresponding mean ages for the Israeli-born benchmark groups in those same years: 33, 35, 37, and 38 years.

Table 1
Percent with BA or higher degree (top panel) and MA or higher degree (bottom panel) among persons 25–54 years old: Israeli-born Jewish Immigrants, Israeli-born Jewish population in Israel, and non-Hispanic White US-born population.

		Men				Women			
Year of observation		1980	1990	2000	2015	1980	1990	2000	2015
Years of arrival		76–80	86–90	96–00	09–17	76–80	86–90	96–00	09–17
% BA +	U.S. pop.	26.1	28.5	30.7	34.6	17.4	24.2	30.5	40.6
	Israeli Immig.	47.8	47.0	57.5	67.3	39.2	50.0	55.1	78.3
	Israeli Pop.	22.3	22.0	22.5	35.4	17.9	21.4	27.5	47.1
	Gap	**25.5**	**25.0**	**35.0**	**31.9**	**21.3**	**28.6**	**27.6**	**31.2**
% MA+	U.S. pop.	9.2	10.2	10.3	11.1	3.9	7.5	9.7	14.3
	Israeli Immig.	21.5	28.6	27.1	35.9	13.1	17.3	22.0	35.7
	Israeli Pop.			7.0	11.8			6.9	16.0
	Gap			**20.0**	**24.1**			**15.1**	**19.7**

Gap = Israeli Immigrants – Israeli Population.

Table 2
Percent with BA, MA, and PhD degrees among persons 25–54 years old: Israeli-born Jewish immigrants and Israeli-born Jewish population in Israel.

		Men		Women	
	Year observation	2000	2015	2000	2015
	Years of arrival	96–00	09–17	96–00	09–17
% BA	Israeli immig.	30.4	31.4	33.1	42.6
	Israeli pop.	15.5	23.6	20.5	31.1
	Gap	**14.9**	**7.8**	**12.6**	**11.5**
% MA	Israeli immig.	19.9	25.6	19.2	30.1
	Israeli pop.	5.8	10.5	6.9	16.0
	Gap	**14.1**	**15.1**	**12.3**	**14.1**
% Ph.D	Israeli immig.	7.1	10.3	2.7	5.6
	Israeli pop.	1.3	1.3	0.7	1.2
	Gap	**5.8**	**9.0**	**2.0**	**4.4**

Table 2 disaggregates the data presented in Table 1, reporting the percentage of individuals with specific educational degrees: BA (top panel), MA (middle) and PhD (bottom) for the two most recent cohorts in 2000 and 2015. It shows that while the gaps between immigrants and the Israeli benchmarks have *decreased* between 2000 and 2015 with respect to a BA degree, especially among men (from 14.9 to 7.8 percentage points), the gaps increased slightly for MA degrees (from 14.1 to 15.1 points among men, and from 12.3 to 14.1 points among women), and rose substantially at the PhD level. A central component of the Israeli brain drain argument concerns the rise in the proportion of young Israeli PhDs leaving Israel for the U.S. or not returning after a post-doc fellowship or PhD studies (Ben David, 2008). In 2000, 7.1 % of recent Israeli immigrant men in the US held a PhD degree, compared to only 1.3 % in the Israeli male population. By 2015, 10.3 % of immigrant men held a PhD degree, while the proportion of PhDs in the Israeli benchmark group remained at its 2000 level. Consequently, between 2000 and 2015 the Ph.D. selectivity gap between those who emigrated and those who stayed have increased from 5.8 to 9.0 percentage points among men, and from 2.0 points to 4.4. points among women. An earlier estimate based on the same data for the cohort arriving in the US in 2001–2006 reported that in 2005-06 the proportion of PhD among immigrant men was 11.8 % (Buryak, 2008). This suggests that the peak years for the "PhD brain drain" occurred during the first decade of the new millennium, a period when Israeli universities were forced to eliminate hundreds of academic positions (Cohen, 2009).

Taken together, the results confirm the hypothesis that there has been an intensification in the educational selectivity of successive cohorts of Israeli immigrants in the US over the past four decades. Selectivity first increased among women arriving in 1986–90, and then among men arriving during 1996–00. Judging selectivity by the percentage of the holders of an advanced degree—MA and in particular PhD—the most recent cohort, arriving during 2009–17, is even more selected on education than the 1996-00 cohort.

5.2. *Income of recent Israeli-born Jewish immigrants*

The educational data we use do not include information on grades or fields of study that could provide better information for the "true" skill level among highly educated immigrants. However, the PUMS and ACS data include information on income from work, which is arguably the best indicator for overall labor market skills, both measured and unmeasured (Borjas, 1987, 1994; Waters and Pineau, 2015). Income is determined by many characteristics, including educational level, experience, field of study, occupation, as well as individual traits that are "unobserved," such as motivation, creativity, willingness to take risks or "ability," however defined. Unobserved factors are nevertheless related to labor market performance and therefore to income. This being the case, income upon arrival in the US, relative to the income of a benchmark of US workers, serves as an indicator of the skills and selectivity of successive cohorts of Israeli immigrants.

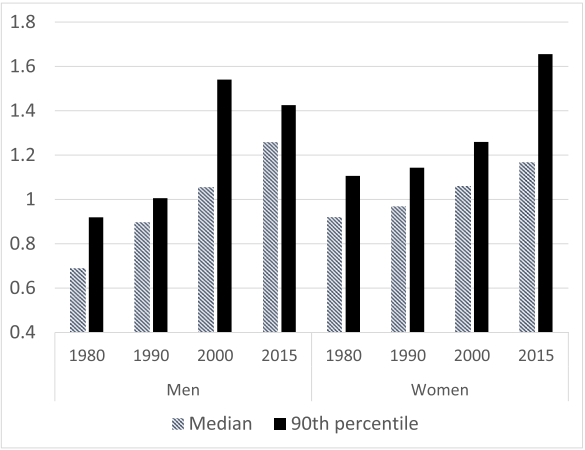

Fig. 2. Income ratios (Israeli immigrants/U.S. benchmark population) at the median and the 90th percentile.

Fig. 2 presents annual income[10] ratios of Israeli immigrants relative to non-Hispanic native-born Whites, at two locations of their respective income distributions: the median and the 90th percentile. Rising income ratios over time indicate an increase in the skills (and therefore selectivity) of successive cohorts of Israeli immigrants compared to earlier cohorts, and vice versa. In 1980s, the median Israeli immigrant men earned only 0.68 (or 68 %) of the income earned by the median member of the benchmark group. Over time, successive cohorts of Israeli immigrants gradually improved their relative income (and their skills), and by 2015 the median Israeli men earned 1.26 of the benchmark group. A similar gradual improvement is observed among women immigrants, who increased their relative income from 0.92 of the benchmark group in 1980 to 1.17 in 2015.

The trend at the 90th percentile is even more pronounced. In 1980, recent Israeli immigrant men who earned more than 90 % of other Israeli immigrants in their cohort, earned less (0.92) than the US benchmark – non-Hispanic native-born Whites located at the 90th percentile of their income distribution. By 2000, top earners in the cohort arriving in 1996–2000 earned 1.54 of the benchmark group, though the ratio declined to 1.43 in 2015. This implies that the most selective cohort of Israeli men arrived in 1996–2000 while those arriving during 2009-17 experienced a slight decline in their selectivity relative to the previous cohort. In contrast, no such decline is observed among Israeli female immigrants at the 90th percentile. Their relative income (and, consequently, skills) improved throughout the entire period, peaking at 1.66 in 2015 among the most recent cohort. That very high ratios—over 1.40—observed among both men and women only at the 90th percentile suggests that the intensification of the positive self-selection has been the most pronounced among the most skilled Israeli immigrants.

On the face of it, the unobserved labor market skills of earlier cohorts of Israeli immigrants to the U.S. appear to have been less favorable than those of later cohorts. However, part of the improvement in the relative income of recent cohorts of Israeli immigrants can be attributed to their rising mean ages (data shown in footnote 9) and educational levels, which surpass not only those of the Israeli population but also those of the U.S. benchmark groups (Table 1).

Stronger evidence for the improvement in the unobserved skills of successive cohorts of Israeli immigrants is derived from more rigorous tests, estimating quintile (ln) income regressions. Specifically, the regression coefficients presented in Table 3 show the advantage (or disadvantage) of Israeli immigrants relative to demographically comparable Americans, namely, non-Hispanic native-born White Americans with the same educational level, age, annual hours of work, and other measured characteristics (being self-employed, currently student, and marital status).

Table 3
Quintile regression coefficients of (ln) annual income from work of recent Israeli-born Jewish immigrants in the U.S., 25–54 years old (relative to demographically comparable non-Hispanic native-born Whites).[a]

Gender	Percentile	1980	1990	2000	2015
Men	50th	−0.174*	−0.019	0.060	0.042
	90th	−0.098	−0.009	0.400**	0.077
Women	50th	−0.034	−0.014	0.140*	0.039*
	90th	0.154	0.073	0.176**	0.193**

*P < .05 **P < .01.

[a] Regressions control for age, annual hours of work, HS dropouts, B.A., MA+, marital status, self-employed, and currently student.

[10] Income is expressed in 2017 dollars and refers to annual income from work for wage and salary workers and the self employed in the year before the observation year. The analyses were restricted to persons who worked at least 480 hours per year.

Table 4
Quintile regression coefficients of (ln) annual earnings of recent immigrants in the U.S., 25–54 years old (relative to demographically comparable native-born non-Hispanic Whites)[a].

		Women		Men	
Country of birth	Percentile	2000	2015	2000	2015
Israel	50	0.140*	0.039*	0.060	0.042
	90	0.176**	0.193**	0.400**	0.077
Sweden	50	0.021	0.099	0.314**	0.284*
	90	0.202	0.076	0.243**	0.564**
Spain	50	0.057	−0.078*	−0.034	−0.045
	90	0.150*	−0.017	0.033	0.115
Italy	50	−0.053	−0.087	−0.168**	0.093
	90	0.050	0.073**	0.144*	0.138**
France	50	0.035	0.005	0.074*	0.122**
	90	0.078	0.224**	0.079	0.128**
UK	50	0.116**	0.123**	0.264**	0.224**
	90	0.323**	0.404**	0.414**	0.452**
Canada	50	0.155**	0.103**	0.171**	0.276**
	90	0.308**	0.304**	0.287**	0.540**

Statistically significant coefficients represent the percent income difference between recent immigrants and demographically comparable native-born Americans.
*P < .05 **P < .01.
[a] Regressions control for age, annual hours of work, HS dropouts, B.A., MA+, marital status, self-employed, and currently student.

In 1980 and 1990 there were no income differences between recent immigrant women and demographically comparable American women. However, by 2000 and 2015, recent Israeli immigrant women, both at the median and the 90th percentile, earned more than demographically comparable US women, and their income advantage was the highest—about 18 % in 2000 and 19 % in 2015—at the 90th percentile. These results provide strong evidence of rising positive selectivity on unobserved traits since 1990, at the median and especially at the top of the income distribution.

Among men, the cohort of 1976-80 earned, at the median, about 17 % *less* than the US benchmark. However, later cohorts, starting with the 1986-90 cohort, earned as much as the US benchmark, indicating an improvement in the unobserved skills of these later cohorts of Israeli men. Among top earners at the 90th percentile, those arriving before 1990 earned as much as demographically comparable US men. In contrast, the 2000 cohort, arriving in 1996–00, earned about 49 % *more* than the US benchmark group, indicating a sharp rise in their unobserved skills (and selectivity) relative to earlier cohorts. Unlike women, where unobserved skills of the 2015 cohort remained high, no such pattern is observed among men. Rather, the cohort of immigrant men at the 90th percentile arriving in 2009–2017 was not as selective on unobserved skills as the preceding cohort arriving in the late 1990s. This was probably due to the dot-com crisis of 2000 and the Great Recession of 2008 harming salaries at the top. Apparently, these events did not affect the selectivity of Israeli women at the 90th percentile, possibly because they were more likely employed in jobs that were less affected by the dot-com crisis and the Great Recession.

In sum, the regression analyses suggest that the labor market skills of successive cohorts of Israeli immigrants in the US have improved since the late 1970s. This improvement in immigrant skills can be attributed to the intensification of their positive selectivity from Israel, not only on education, but also on some unobserved traits. Moreover, as expected, the regressions reveal that the rise in selectivity of Israeli immigrants was the greatest among the most skilled immigrants—those at the 90th percentile—who aspire to join the very top of income receivers in the US.

Finally, to gauge how selective Israeli immigrants are, we compared their selectivity to that of immigrants in the US from other rich countries. Specifically, we estimated identical quintile regressions as presented in Table 3, for immigrants from five European countries—France, Spain, Italy, Sweden and UK—and from Canada for the years 2000 and 2015. The results (Table 4) suggest that women from the UK and Canada were the most selective, with Israeli women not far behind. These three immigrant groups earned more than demographically comparable natives in both 2000 and 2015, both at the median and the 90th percentile. In contrast, Israeli men were among the most selective immigrant group only in 2000, and only for those at the 90th percentile. In 2015, the Israeli cohort of men, like their counterpart from Spain, earned as much as the US benchmark, both at the median and the 90th percentile. At the same year, immigrant men from Canada, UK, Sweden France and Italy earned more than demographically comparable US natives, both at the median and the 90th percentile. These comparisons reveal that, relative to Canada and other rich countries in Western Europe, the selectivity of Israeli immigrants in the US is not exceptional, particularly among men.

6. Discussion and conclusions

The positive selectivity on education of Israeli immigrants in the US is not a new phenomenon. It was detected among immigrants arriving in the US as early as 1976 and may have begun even earlier. Over the years, successive cohorts of Israeli immigrants to the US were even more selective on their schoolings. Educational selectivity first increased among women arriving in 1986–90, and then among men arriving during 1996–00. The two most recent cohorts, observed in 2000 and 2015, are even more highly selected on education than the earlier cohorts, in large part due to increased selectivity on advanced educational degrees, that is, MA, and

especially, PhD degrees. The positive selectivity of Israeli immigrants has improved not only with respect to their educational levels, but also on their unobserved characteristics, as reflected in their higher incomes during their first years in the US. Both the income ratios and the quintile regressions reveal that the greatest intensification in selectivity occurred at the 90th percentile, among the most skilled Israeli immigrants. Taken together, the results not only support the Israeli brain drain argument, but they are also consistent, for the most part, with the economic theory of immigrant self-selection expecting an intensification of the positive selectivity of Israeli immigrants to the US, especially among the highly skilled.

We write "for the most part" because not all the timing of the observed results can be easily explained by the theory guiding our study. For example, given persistent rising inequality at the top of the US income distribution since the late 1970s, rising selectivity on unobserved traits at both the median and the 90th percentile should have already occurred among the 1986-90 cohort. Yet it actually occurred at that time only for immigrant men at the median; it would take another 10 years for the intensification of selectivity to become evident for men at the 90th percentile as well as for women at both the median and the 90th percentile. Likewise, the theory implies that the positive selectivity of men at the median would continue to improve between 1990 and 2015, yet no improvement is observed after 1990. Same with educational selectivity; it is not clear why selectivity among men intensified only during 1996-00 and not 10 years earlier. One possible explanation for these unexpected results is that it takes time for changes in returns to skills to affect immigrants' selectivity. Another possibility is that the U.S. Immigration Act of 1990—aimed at increasing the number of skill-based immigrants—is partly responsible for the rise in the skill level of Israeli immigrants arriving in the U.S. between 1996 and 2000. It is not clear, however, how effective the Act was in achieving this result (Chisti and Yale-Loehr, 2016). At any rate, the PUMS of the U.S. Censuses and the ACS do not include the necessary visa information to explore this possibility. Finally, it is also possible that other factors, both economic and non-economic, have also affected immigrant selectivity during this 40-year period. Notwithstanding these possibilities, the main results still show a clear trend of increasing selectivity among Israeli immigrants to the U.S. over time, particularly at the top of the skill hierarchy.

6.1. *Epilogue*

Since late 2022, when the new Israeli government—considered the most right-wing in the nation's history—assumed power and especially after the onset of the judicial overhaul in early 2023 and the Hamas attack in October of that year, the Israeli press has featured numerous articles reporting on Israelis who had already left Israel or, more commonly, are contemplating doing so. Popular destinations include not only the rich countries in North America, Western Europe and Australia, but also Cyprus, Greece, Portugal and Italy, where purchasing real estate often leads to European citizenship or at least residency (Zarhovitch, 2024).

The reasons for emigration reported by the press vary, and, for the first time in Israel's history, politics, broadly defined, more than economics, is said to be driving Jewish emigration from Israel, or at least the discourse about it. Some Israelis are now worried about the prospect of survival for the State of Israel given the worsening security situation. Many voiced concerns regarding Israel's demographic outlook, in particular the rise in the proportion of the Ultra-Orthodox population and its expected adverse effects on the country's economy, politics and culture. Some add that they see no resolution to the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, noting that both Israel and the Palestinians are increasingly driven by messianic ideologies, making a peace agreement more unlikely (Ayalon, 2024; Fuchs, 2024; Green, 2024; Maariv, 2022; Zarhovitch, 2024).

Whatever specific reasons are given by those contemplating emigration, the individuals considering it appear to be disproportionately highly educated professionals with liberal-Zionist political views. Evidence for the flight of such professionals is anecdotal. For example, the main news item and editorial in Haaretz (the Israeli equivalent of the New York Times) in early 2024 reported that seven faculty members of the Hebrew University's mathematics department—widely regarded as Israel's top academic department—had either left, not returned from sabbatical abroad, or were planning to leave for the U.S. or Europe (Kadari-Ovadia, 2024). There is concern that what began at Hebrew University may spread to other mathematics departments, as well as to other academic fields, the high-tech sector, hospitals, and other successful professionals who can secure high-paying jobs abroad. A rising concern is the soaring number of Israeli physicians delaying their return to Israel after a temporary stay abroad. Typically, top physicians in their late 30s or early 40s spend a few years abroad to learn new subspecialties or techniques before returning to Israel. However, since 2023, a leading Tel Aviv hospital has reported a significant increase in the number of physicians choosing to extend their stays abroad, with many entertaining job offers overseas (Shtarkman and Linder, 2024). While some may eventually return to Israel, it is well known that the risk of staying abroad increases with time in the new destination.

Data on the number and type of emigrants since January 2023 remain limited, primarily because migration is a process that unfolds over time. According to the CBS, Israeli residents are classified as emigrants only after spending at least nine cumulative months abroad within the year following their departure. As a result, emigration statistics for those who left Israel in a given month or year become available only 12 months after the corresponding departure period. Therefore, the number of emigrants who left Israel in all of 2024 will only be available at the end of 2025.

Available data show a marked increase in emigration among Israelis who left Israel in 2023. According to the CBS, emigration was the primary factor behind the decline in Israel's population growth rate, from 1.6 % in 2023 to 1.1 % in 2024 (CBS, 2024b). Between 2009 and 2021, the majority of individuals who emigrated from Israel in a given year were foreign-born. Those who left in 2022 were no exception: 58.8 % of them were new immigrants to Israel, many arriving in the wake of the Russia-Ukraine war (CBS, 2024a). While the CBS has yet to release data on the country of birth of those who emigrated in 2023, there is evidence of a marked increase in emigration among Israeli-born individuals since 2023, relative to annual levels between 2009 and 2022 (Ben David, 2025).

Monthly emigration data (CBS, 2025) indicate that the increase in emigration began before October 2023 and may be linked to the judicial overhaul that was launched in January 2023. The short-term impact of the October 7 attack on Israeli emigration is even more

pronounced: the number of emigrants who left Israel (minus those returning) in October 2023 rose sharply to 12,600 compared to 1,300 a year earlier (October 2022) and 5,100 a month earlier (September 2023). However, in the six months that followed the Hamas attack (November 2023 to April 2024, the most recent data available at the time of writing) the average monthly number of emigrants exiting Israel dropped to around 3,200—slightly below the same period a year earlier. This suggests that the initial wave of emigrants fleeing Israel following October 7 subsided in the following months.

In sum, the CBS data suggest that both the judicial overhaul and the Gaza war had a short-term impact on emigration rates of Israelis, while the long-term effects will depend on how these two events ultimately unfold. During the second intifada, emigration rates peaked in 2001 but were halved in less than five years (CBS, 2007). Recent developments in Israel are not conducive to lowering emigration and alleviating a brain drain; in the past year the Gaza war has spilled over to other fronts. The consensus regarding the war has already begun to erode, and by late 2024 solidarity level among Jews declined sharply from its high level in December 2023 (Harmann et al., 2024), meaning there is little reason to expect it to mitigate emigration, as was the case in the past (Cohen, 1988). The economic outlook is also bleak, as Israel's credit rating has fallen to its lowest level ever (Haaretz, 2024). Finally, at the time of writing (June 2025), the judicial overhaul appears to be gaining renewed momentum, raising further doubts about the future of democratic Israel among secular, liberal Israelis—who tend to be highly educated and are the group most at risk of emigrating.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Yinon Cohen: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Visualization, Validation, Supervision, Software, Resources, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Kaiting Zhou:** Writing – review & editing, Software, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization.

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Appendix A. Number of cases, by gender and year, used in the education and income analyses: recent Israeli-born Jewish immigrants 25–54 years old and the U.S. and Israeli benchmark groups

			Men		
	Year	1980	1990	2000	2015
Education	U.S. Pop.	328,350	391,586	409,315	360,050
	ISR Immig.	205	298	273	334
	ISR Pop.	6711	10,494	12,191	35,346
Income	U.S. Pop.	301,660	359,301	369,988	306,042
	ISR Immig.	146	245	219	270
			Women		
Education	U.S. Pop.	332,262	400,049	414,973	360,807
	ISR Immig.	176	241	229	260
	ISR Pop.	6952	10,673	12,353	36,279
Income	U.S. Pop.	194,025	284,354	311,647	267,398
	ISR Immig.	65	112	102	145

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