Working Their Way Up?

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

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NBER DAE Summer Institute

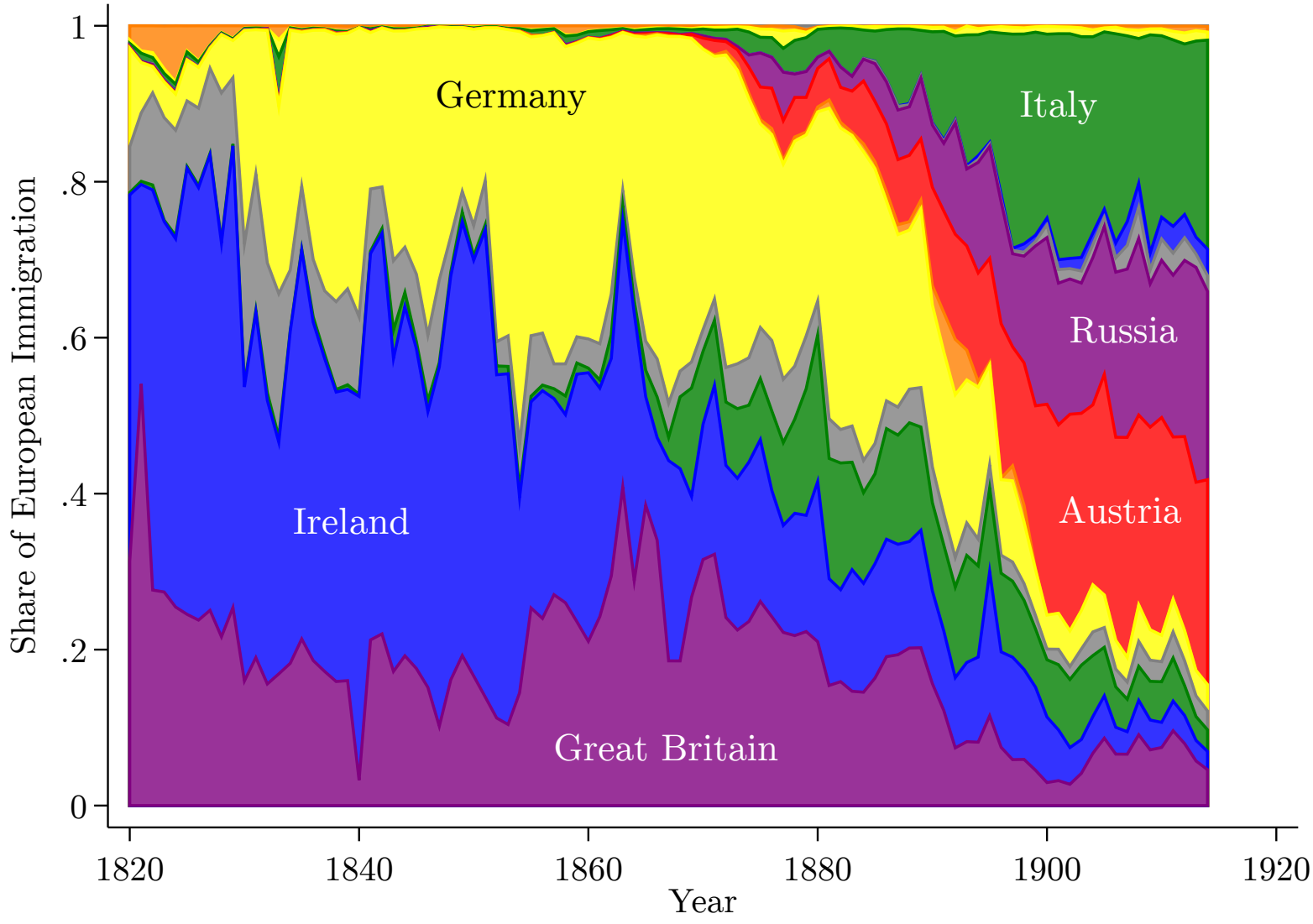
July 7, 2020

The long reach of historical immigrants' experiences

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

(Ken Cucinelli, August 13, 2019)

The long reach of historical immigrants' experiences



Did immigrants "work their way up"?

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

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  - Broad occupational categories (unskilled, farmer, etc.)
  - 1870-based occupational wealth scores
    - Check robustness to occupation-specific age-wealth profile
  - 1900-based income scores (with farmer adjustments)

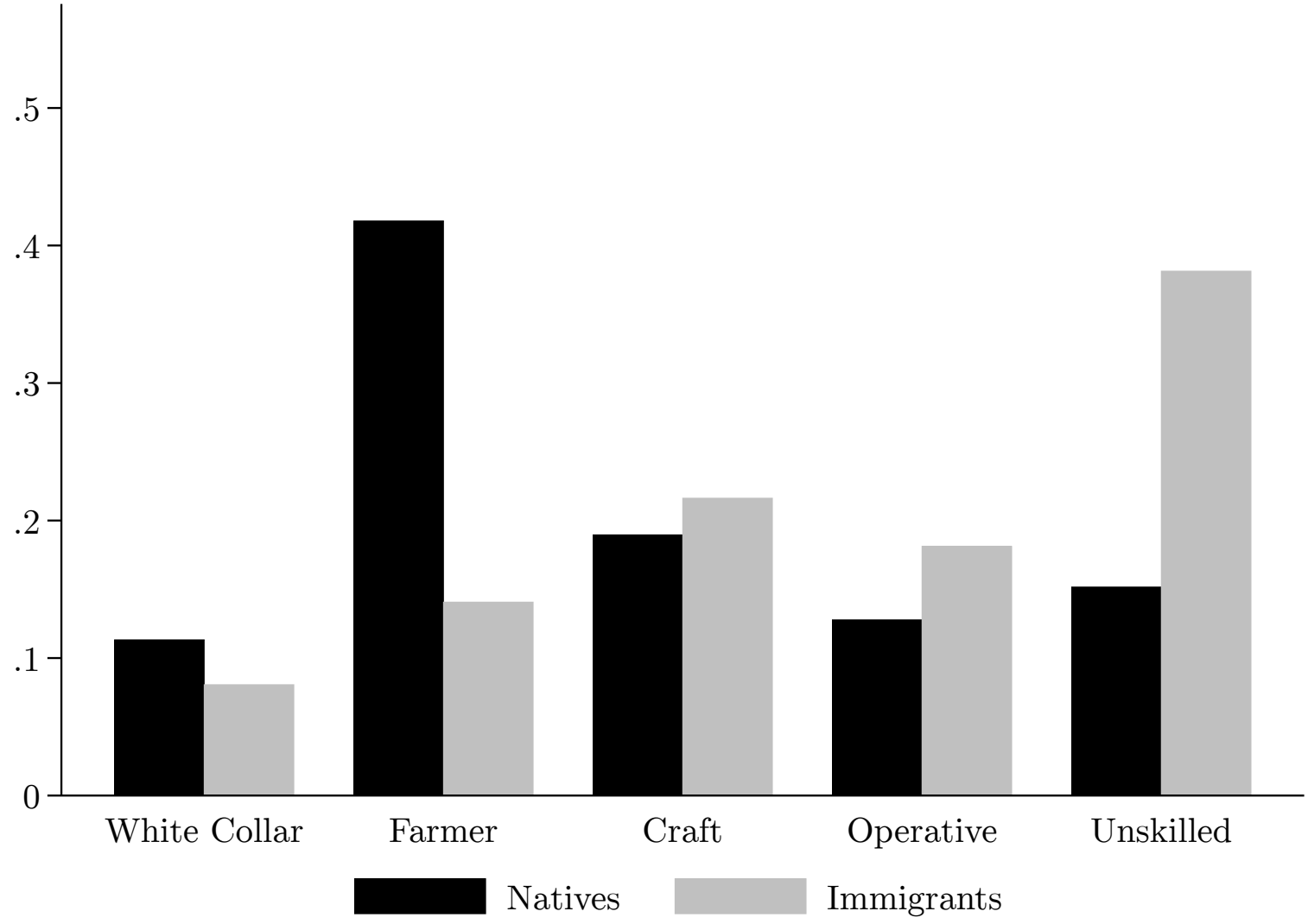
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  - 1870-based occupational wealth scores
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  - 1900-based income scores (with farmer adjustments)
  - Rank relative to non-southern white men 18–74
    - Preferred measure: average rank of two scores

Unconditional Assimilation

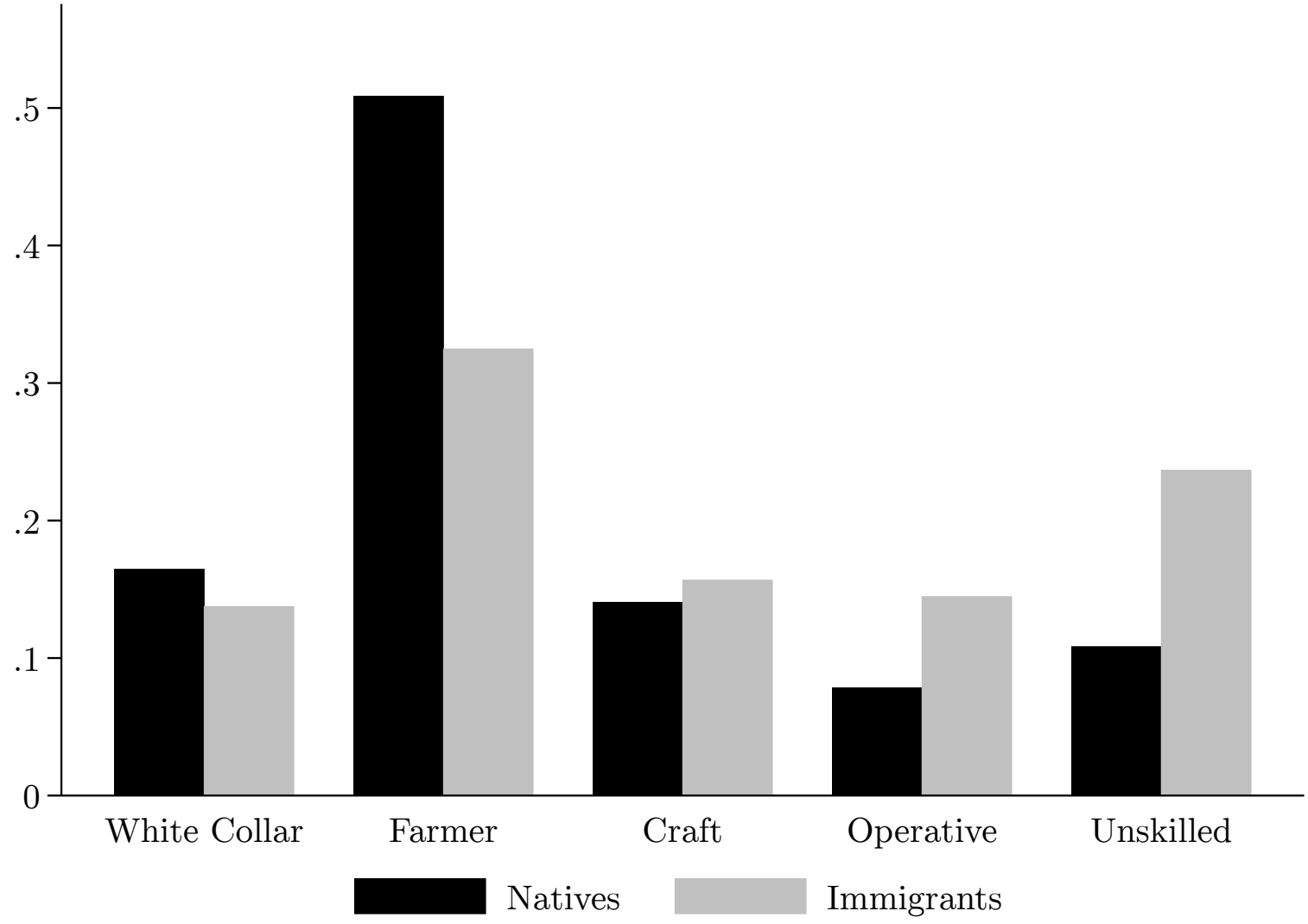
Unconditional Assimilation

1850



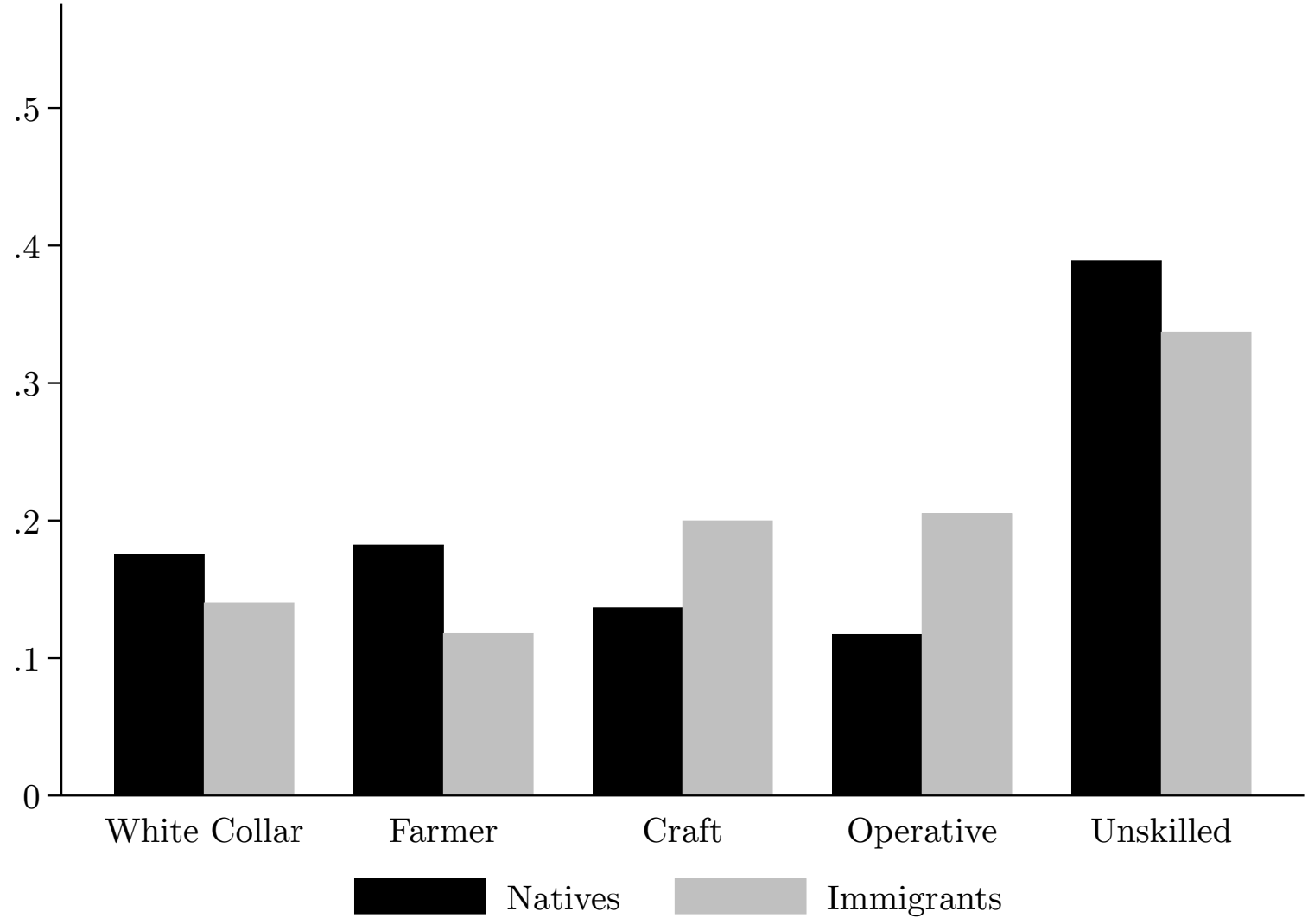
Unconditional Assimilation

1880



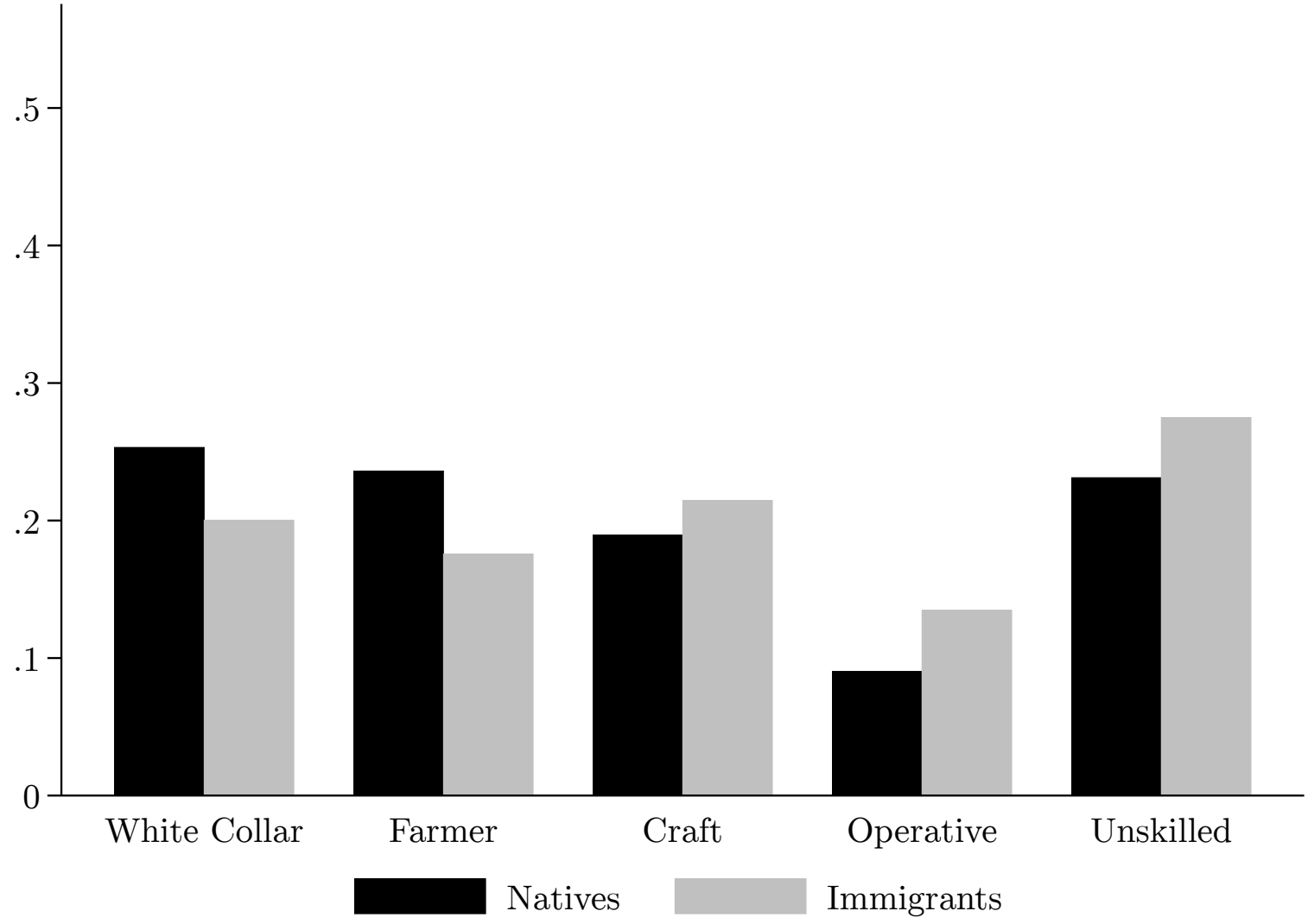
Unconditional Assimilation

1900



Unconditional Assimilation

1930



Unconditional Assimilation

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

Unconditional Assimilation

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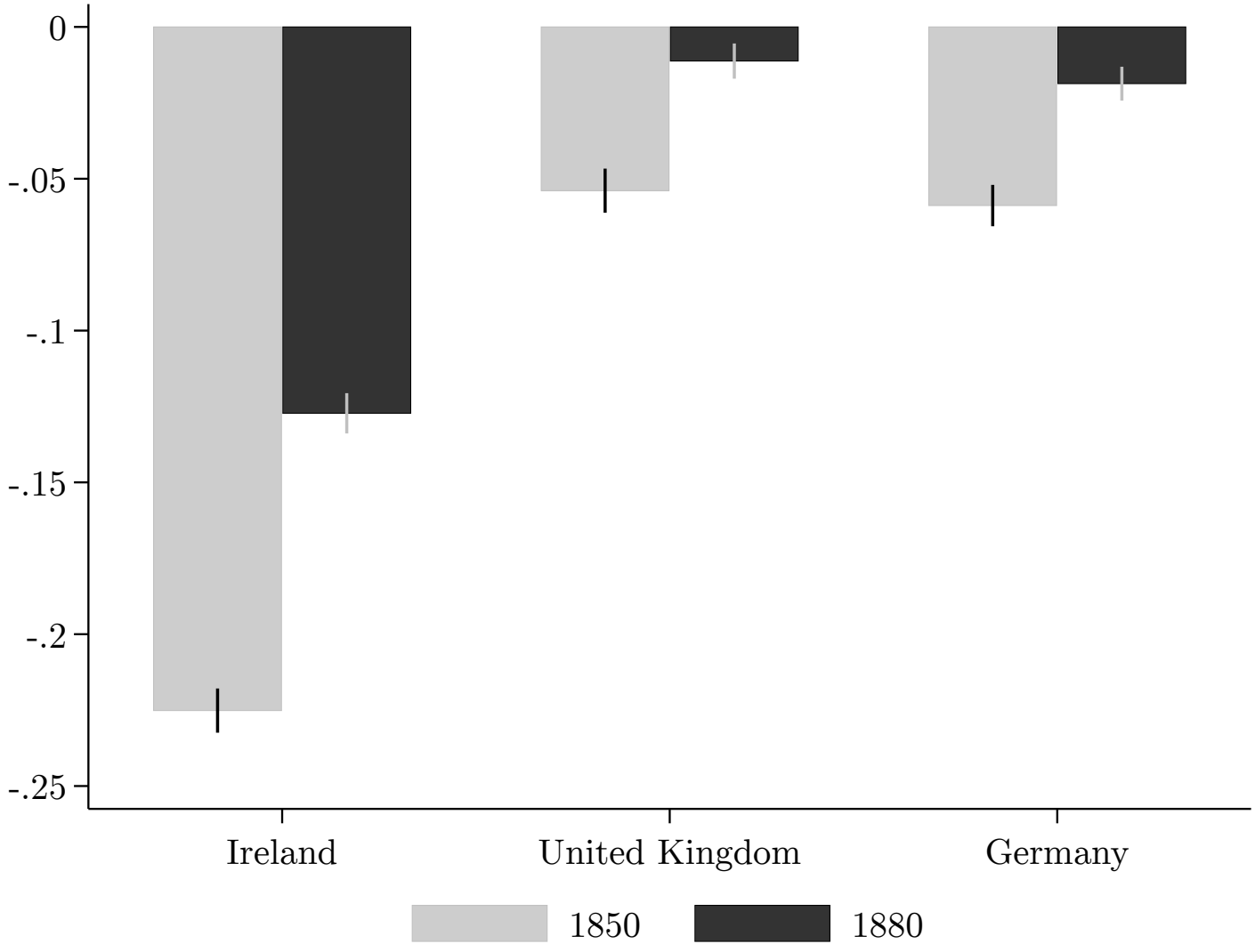
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  - 19th c.: considerable catch up vs. natives
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  - Assimilation benchmark *does have* a historical basis
- Robustness
  - Second-generation natives
  - 20th-century recent arrivals (1890–1900)
 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

Why did assimilation patterns change?

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

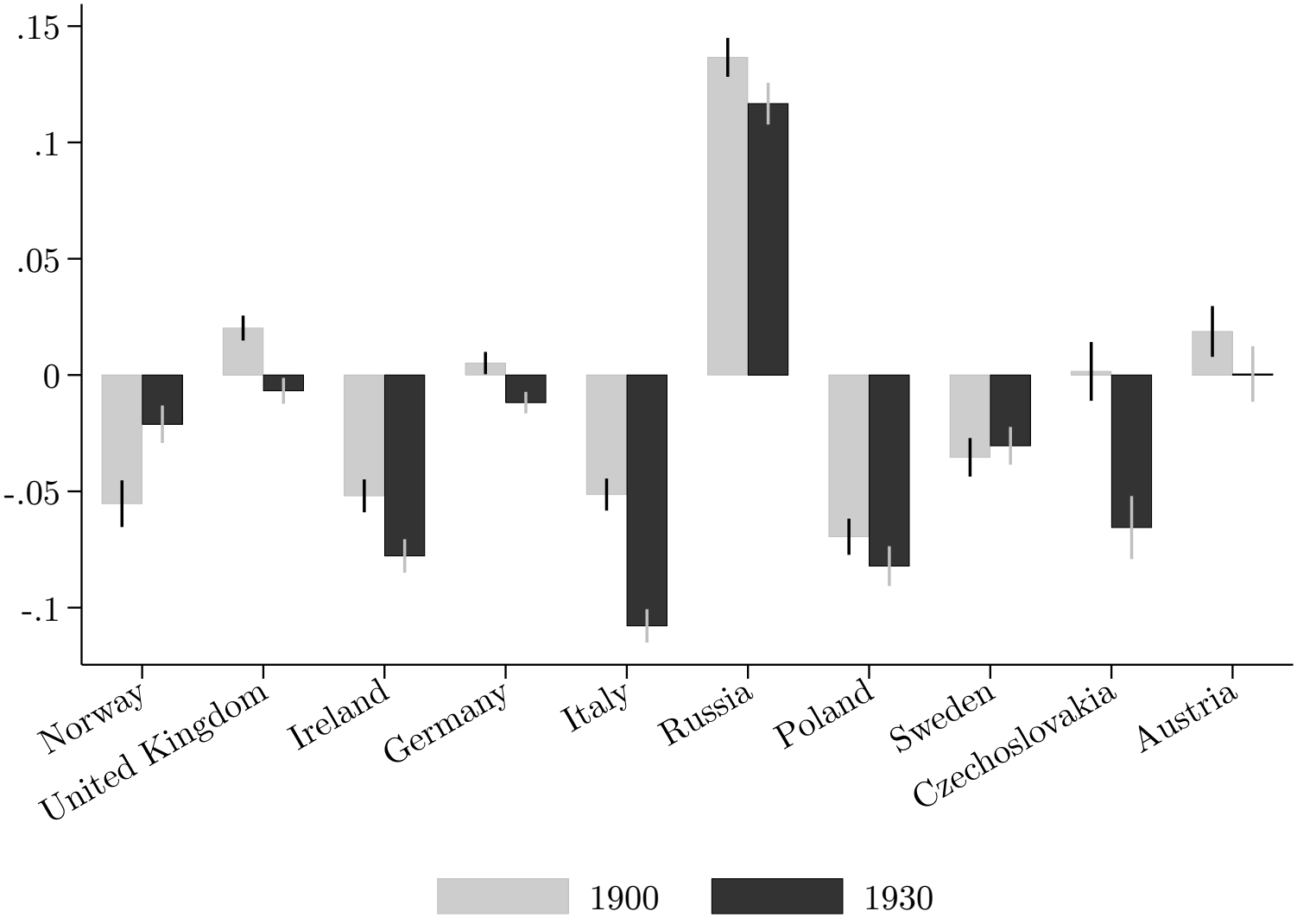
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1850–1880



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1900–1930

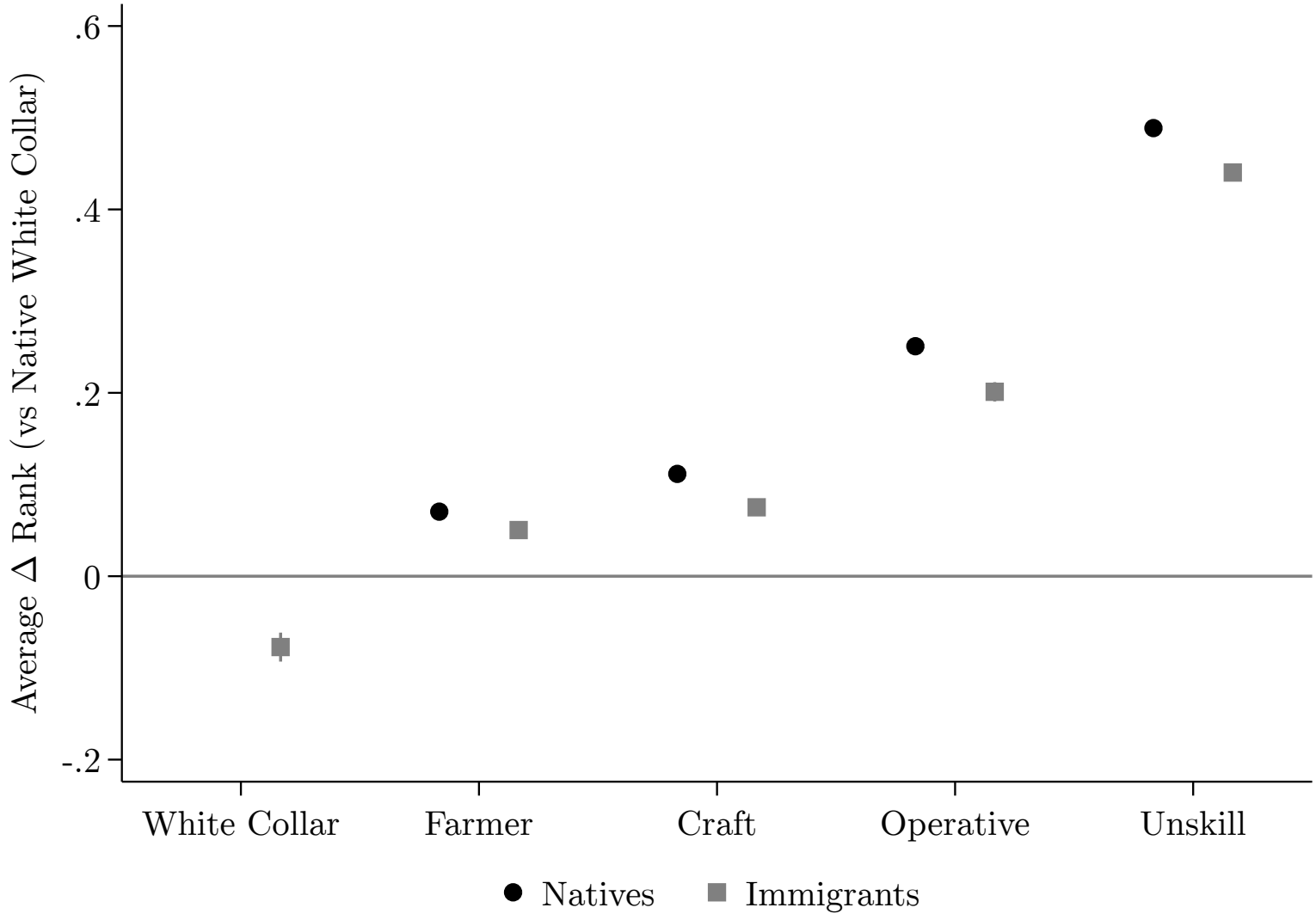


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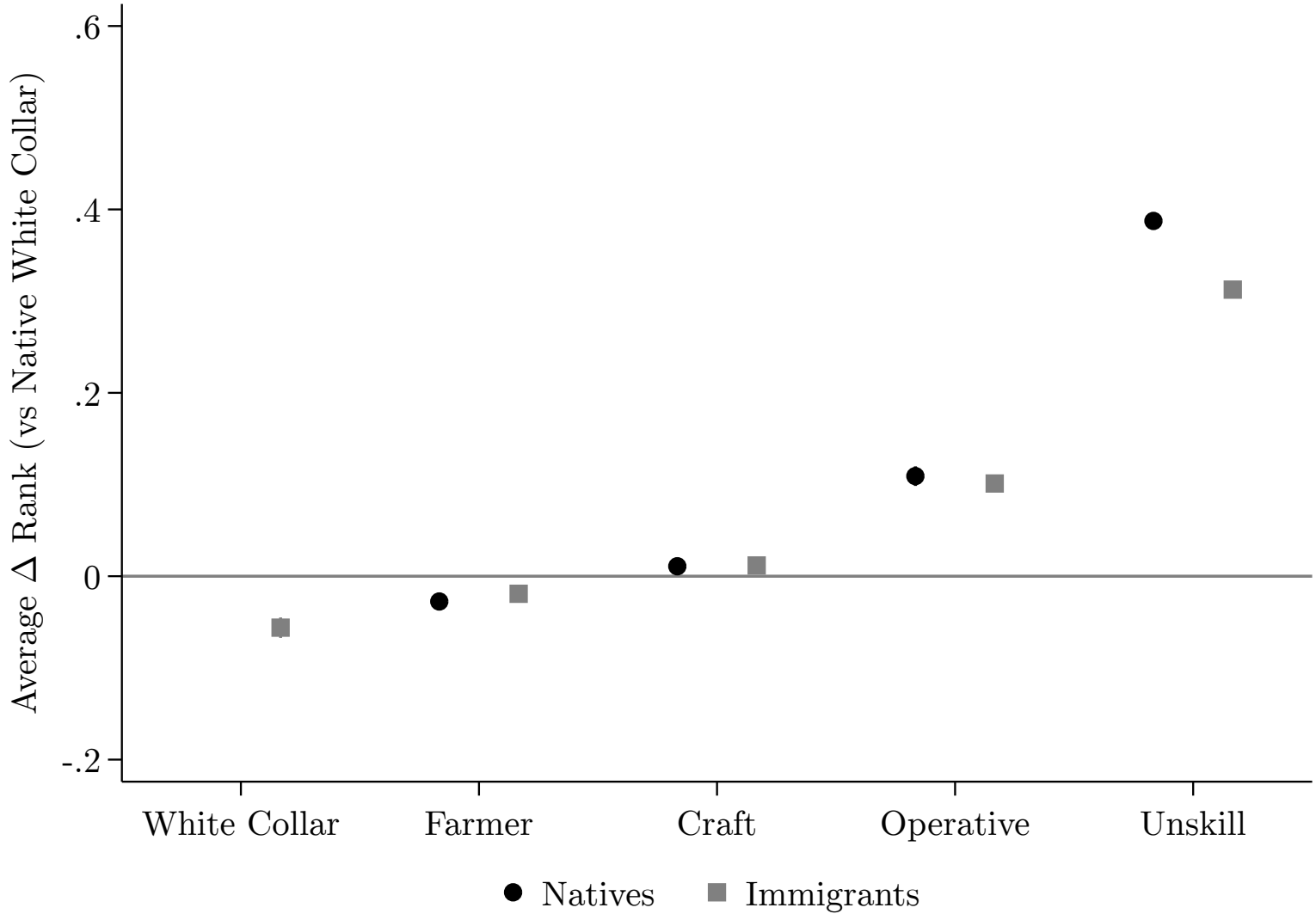
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Conclusion

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