



## **The Complexities of Immigration: Why Western Countries Struggle with Immigration Politics and Policies**

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## Introduction

Almost 200 million individuals, about 3 percent of the world's population, live outside the country where they were born, according to United Nations estimates. Over 100 million migrants live in the more developed regions of the world, including nine million in Northern Europe, 22 million in Western Europe and 38 million in the United States. Proportionally, 9 percent of residents in Northern Europe, 12 percent in Western Europe, and 13 percent in the United States are immigrants.<sup>1</sup> If we were to include their children born in these destinations (the so-called second generation), the figures would roughly double. The global number of migrants more than doubled between 1970 and 2002, and the number continues to rise.<sup>2</sup> As international migration flows expand, so do both the benefits and complexities for governments.

The political puzzles that high levels of immigration create may be even more difficult to solve than the economic, cultural, or security puzzles. At any rate, they must take priority, since governments cannot promulgate and implement economic, cultural, and security policies unless sufficient political forces are mustered. Immigrants should also make politics a priority (although they usually do not do so). After all, immigrants will be successfully incorporated into their host countries only after they have enough involvement and influence in decision-making that they can help shape relevant policies. So politics matter — but for reasons we explain below, supporters of various ideologies in very different countries often run into trouble when they consider immigration and immigrants.

Western liberal democracies enthusiastically promote free or only slightly restricted movement of information, capital, and goods and services — but not of people. Membership is simply too important for any government to relinquish control over who leaves and enters its territory. Clearly, control is never perfect, the composition of a country's population is never ideal, and any sort of immigrant population will bring both benefits and costs. But every competent and rational state will seek to control its borders, attain the right balance of residents' skills and loyalties, and maximize the benefits of immigration while minimizing its costs.

There are no recipes here. Each state makes different choices to attain these goals and new leadership or changes in circumstances lead many states to change their choices over time. The policy issues are numerous, and are further complicated by the fact that immigrants from different nations present distinct demands, needs, and values. Issues for policymakers include, but are not limited to:

- regularizing the status and future of unauthorized immigrants;
- redesigning electoral systems and party structures to give immigrants a genuine political voice;

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations. International Migration 2006. The overall figure includes refugees displaced by conflict as well as the economic migrants who live in the more developed regions. [www.un.org/esa/population/publications/2006Migration\\_Chart/2006IttMig\\_chart.htm](http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/2006Migration_Chart/2006IttMig_chart.htm).

<sup>2</sup> United Nations. International Migration Report 2002. [www.un.org/esa/population/publications/ittmig2002/2002ITTMIGTEXT22-11.pdf](http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/ittmig2002/2002ITTMIGTEXT22-11.pdf)

- developing and coordinating supranational policies toward immigrants and immigration;
- controlling hostility towards and violence against immigrants on the part of native-born residents, and vice versa;
- enabling churches and mosques, advocacy groups, and civic organizations to integrate immigrants into communities;
- figuring out the implications of transnational sentiments and legal statuses;
- incorporating immigrants and their children into schools, jobs, and neighborhoods;
- striving to prevent alienation and radicalization among poor, isolated, or ideologically motivated youth.

This policy brief does not address such issues despite their urgency and importance. Instead, we wish to explore the general political conundrums underlying them. Both the left and the right face normative and partisan differences over these policy choices within their own groups — as do immigrants themselves. Nevertheless, liberal democratic countries will need to somehow manage ideological and political disputes so they can address urgent cultural, economic, political, and moral questions over the next few decades.

### **The Puzzle of Rising Immigration in Democratic Polities**

To begin with, the very fact of immigration creates a central puzzle for democratic theory: For several decades, most Western countries have had high and rising levels of immigration even though a majority of their populations consistently want immigration to stabilize or decrease. This public sentiment has been apparent since the early 1960s, when survey researchers first began to investigate the question of immigration. Table 1 shows the pattern for 2003, the most recent year for which we have comparable data in North America and Europe.

**Table 1. Views on Desirable Trajectories for Immigration in Selected Western Nations, 2003**

Country	Foreign-born population share in 2003 (percent)	Increase levels of immigration "a lot" + "a little" (percent)	Keep levels of immigration the same (percent)	Reduce levels of immigration "a little" + "a lot" (percent)
Austria	11.4	7	30	63
Canada	18.7	30	39	31
Denmark	6.3	10	39	50
Denmark	6.3	10	39	50
France	7.8	8	27	66
Germany	12.9	4	23	73
Great Britain	8.9	6	16	78
Netherlands	10.7	4	27	70
Norway	7.6	8	22	70
Spain	5.3 (2001)	10	37	54
Sweden	12	12	31	57
Switzerland	23.1	6	50	44
United States	12.6	11	32	56

*Note:* For some countries, these results include noncitizen respondents, so the table probably overestimates voters' support for more immigration.

*Sources:* Column 2: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Table A.1.4 "Stocks of Foreign Born Population in Selected OECD Countries."

[www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200708/ldselect/ldeconaf/82/8217.htm](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200708/ldselect/ldeconaf/82/8217.htm); columns 3-5: International Social Survey Program (ISSP), 2003.

With the notable exception of Canada, barely a tenth of the population of any of these countries favors increased immigration; half or more of the residents of these countries, except for Canada and Switzerland, want a decrease.

Governments pursue the opposite of what most voters want over a long period of time on a few other policies as well; the best example is free trade. But such policies are unusual, volatile, and always subject to political challenge and the possibility of a populist revolt. Therefore, governments tend to react defensively about immigration. They are vulnerable to nativist pressures and make a big show of hostility toward illegal immigration — but they continue admitting large numbers of immigrants while turning a relatively blind eye to the unauthorized. Immigrants are simply too important to the economy, demographic health, and thus the fiscal health of host countries to be excluded, even if governments could keep them out. However, immigration policy and policies toward immigrants rest on a shaky foundation from the perspective of any political party seeking to win elections, and this political weakness has consequences for all immigration-related policies.

## Ideological Conundrums

### Problems for the Left

Within the context of popular distaste for immigration, native-born leftists in most Western nations are more welcoming to, or at least tolerant of, immigrants than are native-born rightists. Table 2 shows that members of left parties are consistently, if modestly, more favorable in their immigration position.

**Table 2. Approval of Immigration among Supporters of the Two Largest Political Parties in Selected Western Nations, 2003**

Support for Increasing Immigration or Keeping It at the Same Level				
Country	Largest party on the Left (percent)		Largest Party on the Right (percent)	
Austria	SPOE	35	OEVP	31
Canada	Liberal	72	Conservative	62
Denmark	Social Democratic	56	Liberal	49
France	Socialist	49	UMP-Conservative	21
Germany	Social Democratic (SPD)	33	Christian Democratic/Christ. Social (CDU/CSU)	22
United Kingdom	Labor	26	Conservative	14
Netherlands	Labor (PvdA)	39	Christian Democratic(CDA)	22
Norway	Labor	29	Progress	5
Spain	Socialist (PSOE)	50	Popular (PP)	39
Sweden	S (Social Democrats)	43	M (Liberal Conservative)	26
Switzerland	Social Democratic	73	Swiss Peoples	25
United States	Democratic	49	Republican	34

*Note:* The figures include respondents who favored increasing immigration “a lot” or “a little” or “keeping it at the same level.” A large majority in both columns chose “the same.” For some countries, the sample size for respondents identifying with even the two largest parties is small, so these figures are not completely reliable. Party labels were provided by ISSP. Source: International Social Survey Program (ISSP), 2003.

These figures accord with our general understanding of left and right ideologies. Social democratic (in the European context) and liberal (in the American context) activists tend to be relatively more oriented toward the international arena and less isolationist.<sup>3</sup> They tend to be more culturally flexible or cosmopolitan in their commitments, if not necessarily in their behaviors, and they sympathize with the desire to escape poverty and oppression that drives many to emigrate from their home country. In recent years, European (and increasingly

<sup>3</sup> The present American political configurations with regard to Iraq, and earlier with regard to Vietnam, are historical anomalies.

American) leftist support for Palestinians in the Middle East has augmented sympathy for Muslim immigrants.

Leftists also believe in respecting cultural differences and honoring group identities, often through explicit public policies of multiculturalism. But they disagree profoundly with many immigrants' gender practices, their treatment of children (particularly daughters), and their views on homosexuality. Especially but not only in Europe, leftists are insistently secular, so they may be uneasy about immigrants' religious commitments and practices. Leftist political actors may also worry that low-skilled immigrants will take jobs away from low-skilled, native-born workers. This dilemma is especially acute when the threatened native workers are disproportionately ethnic minorities, such as black descendants of slaves in the United States. So the left endorses at least some aspects of immigration but has many concerns about actual immigrants.

### **Problems for the Right**

Political actors on the right also face ideological and partisan dilemmas. Rightists tend to be unenthusiastic about immigration per se, for reasons that are the mirror image of the left: they are more isolationist, more culturally and politically nationalist, more concerned about the rule of law and legal status per se, and more inclined to rely on international markets than on migration to alleviate worldwide poverty. But rightists' views on gender and parental roles, homosexuality, and religiosity accord much more with the views of many immigrants than they do with those of the leftists. Social conservatives are also more sympathetic to some immigrants' desire to bring religious values and practices into the public realm. Rightists, then, resist immigration but have much in common with a high proportion of actual immigrants.

The right faces additional dilemmas with regard to the political incorporation of immigrants. Although conservatives have little tolerance for illegal immigration, they sometimes manage or own businesses that depend on unauthorized immigrant labor and the willingness of the immigrants to accept low wages and difficult working conditions. Industries of this sort, like a restaurant owners' association or a construction trade association, can often be a potent national interest group. Conservatives might prefer regularizing the status of unauthorized immigrants in order to maintain a stable workforce and to discourage the casual and widespread acceptance of illegality. Regularization would also eliminate the hypocrisy of the government spending tax revenues on border protection while employers hire workers who foil that protection — and generate profits that can be taxed. But conservatives find it unpalatable to publicly endorse “amnesty” in the United States or to be equivalently “soft” on unauthorized immigrants in Europe.

The right faces an even deeper predicament regarding the ultimate goal of immigration policies and policies toward immigrants. Conservatives tend to be “national particularists” (in the words of political scientist Christian Joppke), meaning that they endorse unilateral assimilationism or liberal neutrality among individuals. But some conservatives are also nativists — and demonstrating hostility toward immigrants is not a good strategy for persuading them to assimilate. It is not easy for a political party or organization seeking to unify rightists to reconcile these two contradictory impulses.

## **Immigrants' Choices**

Immigrants also get caught up in these conundrums, which surely affect them more deeply. Should immigrants ally with conservatives, who may hold similar cultural values and provide employment, but who may also oppose further immigration, want to exact a stiff price for incorporation, and flirt with xenophobia? Or should they ally with leftists, who oppose and even scorn some of their cultural or religious values, but who might help enact their cultural preferences, provide more social services, or support their access to the labor market?

The right strategy for building coalitions with other immigrants is just as unclear. Should immigrant groups ally with refugees, unauthorized workers, or highly skilled temporary workers, even if they come from a different part of the world and are otherwise dissimilar? Or should they seek to form coalitions with native-born residents of the same nationality or even of the same broad social class, in the hopes of avoiding competition over jobs and tension over status and resources? Another question: should immigrants aim to enter their new polity as individuals or as members of an ethnic group? Can they retain ties to their countries of origin while becoming a citizen of the receiving country; should they ally with co-religionists across national borders; should they permit or encourage their children to become full-fledged Germans, Dutch, or Americans?

Variants of these questions have always faced migrants, as a rich literature of memoirs and histories shows. But some issues and options are new or have attained a new urgency in this era of easy international travel, of stateless organizations willing to use violence to attain their goals, and of host countries increasingly nervous about security and national unity. For instance, migrants from former colonies might wonder how they can take advantage of their linguistic and cultural ties while avoiding demeaning ethnic stereotypes. And even the old questions have no settled answers.

## **Policy Choices**

Cross-cutting political and ideological commitments not only make life complicated for party leaders, they also make it even more difficult for host countries to address political, cultural, and economic questions. Like the partisan dilemmas, these policy dilemmas contribute to high levels of uncertainty about the eventual success of immigrant integration.

## **Economic Policies**

Western nations face low birth rates and the retirement of native-born workers born during the baby boom. The native-born population also will not take certain jobs (especially dirty jobs) unless these jobs pay relatively well. This means Western nations must balance their need for immigrant workers to compensate for these circumstances with the need to regulate migrant flows, reduce unemployment, and control public dependency. They appear unable to get this balance right for very long.

Nations have experimented with a variety of policies, for example: short- and long-term guest worker programs; higher and lower overall quotas; ignoring and cracking down on low-skilled unauthorized immigrants; raising and lowering the number of slots for high-skilled immigrants; enhancing and limiting public services; expanding and contracting

educational and language programs; encouraging workers to move to underdeveloped parts of the nation, and concentrating them in major cities.

No single set of choices may be “right” over the long term for maintaining the balance between too many and too few workers of a given skill level. At best, a nation can hope to adopt intelligent policies that solve actual problems in the short term rather than pursuing partisan or ideological ends that have little to do with genuine economic needs or market forces. With luck and skill, together with appropriate advocacy and care, such policies need not sacrifice immigrants themselves for the sake of actual or perceived national imperatives.

### **Cultural Policies**

Western nations must also balance the need for national integrity and unity with the appeal of diversity, of acquiring fresh ideas and energy, and of individuals and groups having the freedom to restyle their lives. Here, too, they may not be able to find the right balance or maintain any balance for long. Host countries have tried an array of policies: liberal neutrality, multiculturalism, national particularism, republican universalism, affirmative action, energetic assimilationist efforts, regional or national homogeneity, separatism pillarization, transnationalism, supranational legislation and regulation, etc.

All of these policies have virtues and flaws, as well as exceptionally passionate advocates. Moreover, analysts and political activists disagree on what the virtues may be or whether overcoming the flaws requires a more intensive application of the same policies or shift to different ones. A nation should not expect stable solutions; rather it should aim for intelligent strategies that solve actual problems in the short run. This seems obvious, but is sometimes rare; politicians and advocates often find themselves promoting polarization in cultural arenas instead of adopting pragmatic, political compromises in cultural disputes.

### **Political Incorporation**

Finally, political systems must strike a balance between too much and not enough openness towards new constituents, demands, and activists. Political parties are always attuned to the forthcoming election and always compelled to respond to their current electoral base. But in order to thrive, they must also look to the future and appeal to new interests. This conundrum explains why in the United States, the Republican Party (and the Democratic Party to a lesser degree) is split between wanting to restrict immigration and punish unauthorized immigrants on the one hand and seeking to attract the huge pool of current and future Latino voters on the other.

Policymakers face a slightly different dilemma from political parties. Elected and appointed officials need stability and predictability in order to make and implement policies, but they must also accommodate major demographic shifts that inevitably change their tasks, especially in gateway cities and rapidly transforming small towns. That conundrum plays out in the institutions that have the least control over their circumstances and are closest to the most vulnerable among the native-born and immigrants: schools, religious organizations, social service agencies, health care providers, and criminal justice systems. Policymaking may lose coherence under these cross-pressures. For example, in the United States, some local jurisdictions have adopted harsh regulations against unauthorized immigrants while others are working strenuously to cope with the presence of immigrants in ways that will benefit all

residents (e.g., through programs of bilingual and adult education or new training for police and social service workers).

Central government officials must also balance domestic needs and pressures with those of the international or intergovernmental arena. Transnational links among countries, or the relationship between national and European Union-level parliaments, will inevitably involve complex and simultaneous political negotiations. Once again, the search for ideal or even stable solutions may well be a waste of effort. The more appropriate goal is to try to steer the polity toward accommodating new groups without excessively disrupting the old ones.

## **Conclusion**

Immigration has helped drive the development of some Western countries and has changed most others — how could it not? It is an exciting, powerful force with the potential to benefit those who move on, those who stay behind, and those who receive. But immigration provokes difficulties that cut across party lines and disrupt old coalitions, thus requiring governments to constantly adjust established policies and invent new ones. Involving immigrants themselves is essential to designing any successful strategy, but their incorporation into political decisionmaking is itself one of the problems to be solved. How political officials and policymakers deal with immigration over the next few decades will be just as important as the question of how they will deal with the movement of money, ideas, goods, and boundaries across the continent of Europe.

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