

Commentary on Session II

The Politics of Migration and Trade

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The field of political economy has long produced theoretically informed empirical research on the politics of international trade. For example, few books have enjoyed a better reputation than E. E. Schattschneider's 1935 classic study of the Smoot–Hawley Tariff (*Politics, Pressures, and the Tariff*). Since that early date, trade politics has developed into a major subfield in political science. Immigration, on the other hand, hardly attracted the interest of political scientists of Schattschneider's generation. The Immigration Act of 1924 did not inspire a book capable of launching a new field of study as did Schattschneider's investigation of the tariff. Indeed, it took well over a half century for political scientists to turn to the analysis of the politics of immigration, and the literature is not nearly as strong empirically or theoretically as that on trade in goods, services, and money. Most work on the politics of immigration does not treat the movement of people across borders as a factor of trade at all. Whether ideas, methods, hypotheses, and analytical techniques employed by political economists of trade can be applied to the political economy of immigration is a question a disconcertingly small number of political scientists have asked.

Summary of the Papers

Trade theory predicts that an open migration system increases efficiency, productivity, and wealth but that “politics” rears its ugly head and imposes restrictions. Most political science models developed to explain why politics confounds

the adoption of open immigration regimes focus either on material interests (the costs and benefits of migration, who wins and who loses from the competition and redistribution of income that migration always entails) or on cultural factors (the ethnic, religious, and other differences between migrant and native populations).

Both by the subjects they investigate and by implication, if not explicit argument, the papers on this panel provide interesting evidence on the question of the political dynamics of trade and immigration policies. Valerie Hunt investigates the development and evolution of mass opinion on immigration. Marc Rosenblum presents, in the context of a North American case study, an analysis of opportunities for and obstacles to multilateral agreements on immigration that, since Smoot–Hawley, have been a regular feature of international relations. Mexico, the United States, and Canada adopted a free trade agreement in 1994. Why have those same countries had such difficulty agreeing on a common migration regime?

Both Hunt and Rosenblum document how “politics” in the guise of security concerns in the wake of 9/11 derailed a process that appeared well on its way to the achievement of a migration agreement between Mexico and the United States.

Paper-by-Paper Comments

Valerie Hunt

Hunt’s paper, “Political Implications of U.S. Public Attitudes Toward Immigration on the Immigration Policymaking Process,” has two objectives: to tell us how and when the public cares about immigration and how and when what the public thinks matters. We are in a novel situation, as was indicated by the November 2006 midterm elections. The American public is thinking about immigration policy; what the public thinks about it appears to be affecting vote choices in congressional and gubernatorial races; and it is at least possible, as Hunt predicted, that the immigration records of public officials affected a few marginal races. This is unusual, to say the least, because public opinion on immigration in the U.S. normally has only the most insignificant effects on electoral outcomes. Immigration typically falls far down the list of voter concerns, and it rarely determines vote choice (Gimpel and Edwards 1999). The Tarrance Poll results (in Table 2 of Hunt’s paper) show that about one-third of respondents say they would not vote for a candidate who stands for most of the issues they support except immigration. This is really quite a strong finding.

Hunt’s paper deals directly with the effect of 9/11 and heightened concerns about terrorism on public attitudes toward illegal migration and the ways in

which politicians and activists frame the issue. The direct connection of the terrorist attacks with people in the country under various immigration statuses, legal or illegal, was, depending on your view, either a stunning wake-up call for those who had been too complacent about immigration or a golden opportunity for critics of U.S. immigration policy to attach immigration restriction to the war on terror. In both cases, security became more of a focus of research and political debate. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize how much resistance there was among academics and policy wonks to conceding the legitimacy of analyzing immigration from a security angle.

Even after the terrorist attacks in the United States and Europe, resistance to a security focus persists, perhaps even growing in reaction to enhanced state policies to control and monitor migration here and abroad. A large literature in political science and related fields critiques the “securitization” of immigration, that is, turning an innocent economic and humanitarian phenomenon into a potentially criminal law enforcement matter. A popular line is that with the end of the Cold War, the police and intelligence services of Western states have nothing to do now that they aren’t hunting down communist subversives. Dangerous immigrants, in this scenario, are a convenient pretext for maintaining and even expanding the budgets of security services (Bigo 2005).

A common criticism of trade-based interpretations of migration is that politics distorts the economic relationships trade theory predicts. This is because some groups that appear to be harmed economically by immigration support it anyway, and others that appear to gain nevertheless oppose it.

A book that relates to this problem is Mikhail Alexseev’s *Immigration Phobia and the Security Dilemma*. Hunt talks about the connection, or disconnect, between “real world” conditions and public perceptions of these conditions. This is admittedly a difficult issue for the analyst. Alexseev offers one promising framework. He observes a number of cases he considers surprising or irrational—situations in which the negative reaction to immigration seems grossly disproportional.

How can such overreactions be explained? Alexseev employs the concept of the security dilemma, an idea developed in the international relations field to refer to the dynamics that emerge when state A decides to enhance its security by investing in defense, thereby alarming its neighbors, states B and C, which either expand their own armaments or launch a pre-emptive strike. As applied to ethnic conflict, it captures the competition that arises among proximate groups that obsess over their relative power, especially when the central government authorities appear to have lost their capacity to maintain law and order.

Alexseev identifies four general factors that shape perceptions of ethnic insecurity. Each, I think, has relevance to specific contemporary U.S. attitudes toward Mexican immigration.

Anarchy	(broken borders)
Intent	(<i>reconquista</i> , an invasion)
Groupness	(non-English speaking, refusal to assimilate)
Socioeconomic impact	(migrants depress wages, take our jobs, live on welfare)

Critics of illegal immigration from Mexico point out that the federal government has failed to assert its right to regulate national borders; that the fact that Mexicans have a unique historical claim to the American Southwest makes migration from Mexico especially problematic; that because of their numbers, concentration, and contiguity with their homeland, they have fewer incentives to learn English and embrace American culture and identity; and finally, that they constitute a major threat to the livelihoods of low-income Americans.

An interesting datum in Hunt's paper is found in Table 4, which reports Pew Research Center for the People and the Press survey results. These show stronger anti-immigrant sentiment in red counties than in blue, what you would expect. What is surprising and needs explaining is why negative sentiment is higher in counties with low proportions of immigrants and weaker in counties with more.

Alexseev's model may help with this. It's a pattern that will likely persist and become more prominent due to changing population patterns. Numerous observers have noted the growing tendency of Americans to cluster in residential areas where most of their neighbors share their socioeconomic and political characteristics. The resulting homogeneity makes even small numbers of immigrants highly visible.

Marc Rosenblum

Rosenblum provides a smart, detailed review of the major characteristics of the contemporary U.S.–Mexico immigration context in his paper, "U.S.–Mexican Migration Cooperation: Obstacles and Opportunities." His main question is what factors facilitate or impede cooperation between the U.S. and Mexico over immigration policy.

In his short theoretical discussion, he presents a lucid summary of the relevance of bargaining models from international relations scholarship to immigration regimes. He might have come at the problem a bit differently, and more directly linked the politics of immigration with the politics of trade, by asking why Mexico and the U.S. were able to negotiate a free trade agreement but not broker even a bilateral immigration deal, let alone a free movement regime. Does immigration produce the same sorts of coalitions as trade politics? The raw materials of an answer are in the paper.

Rosenblum presents a thorough and authoritative summary of the factors that

affect migration agreements between the two countries—national preferences, domestic politics, and so forth—but he concludes that the key factor determining whether cooperation succeeds or fails is the general political context, the broad bilateral, regional, and global setting. Impulses to cooperate over immigration get swallowed up in the larger context, which most likely has little or nothing to do with immigration per se. This was certainly how the plans of Presidents Fox and Bush were sidetracked by the attacks in September 2001.

On first inspection, it would appear that the U.S. has little to gain from a bilateral immigration agreement with Mexico. The U.S. is interested, at least officially, in reducing the scale of illegal migration across its southern border. Mexico, on the other hand, has little interest in stemming the tide; indeed, it has every incentive to see it continue. Even if Mexican officials were more sympathetic to U.S. complaints, both human rights and civil liberties norms keep a democratic state, even a fledgling one, from preventing its citizens from exiting the country.

Unlike the U.S., Mexico has many concrete objectives in its cooperative agenda: a guest worker program, less enforcement at the border, fewer deportations, maintaining and facilitating the flow of remittances, and so on. All of these require politically costly concessions on the part of the U.S. government. (See the report of the Bilateral Commission [1989], which contains a laundry list of what the U.S. should do for Mexico and almost nothing that Mexico should do for the U.S.)

Rosenblum makes a strong case, however, that in the post-9/11 context, any immigration settlement between the two countries would entail substantial reforms on Mexico's part. These might include agreement by Mexico to accept and facilitate long-distance returns of illegal crossers to the interior of the country, serious efforts to create security on the Mexican side of the border, and active assistance in counterterrorism efforts. The bilateral relationship is still asymmetrical, with the U.S. facing the necessity of giving more than it receives, but it is more equitable than it has been in years, and that should support greater collaboration in the future.

References

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