



Why Does Immigration Arouse Deep Feelings and Conflicts?

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Immigration – and public policies to manage it – arouses strong emotions and fierce social and political battles, not just in the United States but in most other countries across the world. Why is this true? Each nation has its own issues that inspire or enrage, of course, but there are widespread, underlying patterns that can be identified and taken into consideration by reformers.

Reformers trying to facilitate immigration are often locked in battles with groups that want to place limits on international migration. Combatants start from very different world views – not only emphasizing different values but almost speaking different languages. To avoid destructive backlashes, reformers must understand and respect the values and perspectives of all groups involved in public debates, as we can see from a closer look at the United States.

Immigration Advocates Often Stress Broad Economic Gains

Advocates for more open immigration policies tend to talk about economic benefits. The unspoken premise is holistic and utilitarian: when most of us are better off, then supposedly everyone gains. Social science research backs this idea. Immigration usually proves to be a net positive for host societies, providing workers and consumers who help boost economic growth, and tax revenues. Alan Greenspan, the former Chairman of the U.S. Federal Reserve Board, emphasized another benefit when he argued that immigrant labor lowers prices and thus helps keep inflation in check.

Research further shows that immigrant workers, especially the low-skilled, normally complement rather than compete with host society workers. Today, not enough Americans are available to work in jobs at places such as fast food restaurants and summer resorts. Sociologist Frank Bean and his colleagues show that only about ten percent of working-age Americans currently have less than a high school education, compared to more than 80 percent in 1950. Low-skilled jobs are sadly still proliferating, but there are many fewer natives willing to claim them.

Although economic and demographic realities may support opening doors for immigration, such arguments mean little to voters who feel they are losing out. One poll found that more than 15 percent of Americans say they know someone who has lost a job to an immigrant, or say they have suffered such a loss. Such citizens wonder, “Why should I pay the cost of immigration? What about me?”

What Scholars Know about Anti-Immigrant Attitudes

Anti-immigrant sentiment is not just about economics, however. Social science research points to broader social concerns as well. The bad news is that native social fears about immigrants are common. The good news is that adverse attitudes are not inevitable or immutable.

When do fears about immigrants tend to peak? Scholars have learned that the type of newcomers entering a country matters – typically, there is much more native opposition to low-skilled migrants than to high-skilled newcomers such as physicians. This may be because low-skilled migrants are more likely to have large differences from native populations in lifestyle, language, or religion, and these can seem more threatening.

The social contexts in which natives and newcomers interact with one another matter a great deal, and in complex ways. Anti-immigrant views can spike in places with rapidly growing immigrant populations, especially in host communities that already faced adverse economic challenges. Many places in the American South and Midwest fit this description, and reformers seeking to ease immigration need to be especially

sensitive in these contexts. Reformers inspired by ideas about universal human rights often push to extend protections to the most vulnerable – and soon find themselves in cultural clashes with host populations that see such people as threats.

Although low-skilled immigrants are at risk to face the most negative reactions, not all of them face the same level of risk. Low-skilled newcomers often face hostile reactions if they do not speak the host society language, if they cannot or do not hold jobs, or if they have arrived without legal authorization. Anti-immigrant restriction movements can flare in such situations.

Media coverage of immigrants can also make a difference, in sometimes surprising ways. A troubling research finding is that anti-immigrant views may go up following increased media coverage – whether it is positive or negative. Just making immigrants more visible can arouse tensions.

How to Bridge the Divides

The foregoing suggests at least three different perspectives through which differently situated social groups view immigration and immigrants. National experts and policymakers often take a utilitarian, economic view, while rights-oriented advocates stress universal human dignity and equal protections for migrant workers and residents. But the most consequential perspective, and one held by a large number of ordinary citizens, is what we can call the traditional community perspective. This is about valuing stable communities. For people invested in community life ways, changes brought by immigrants can be unwanted and threatening.

While racism should be condemned, reformers need to be careful not to label citizens who value established practices as “racists.” After all, traditional community ties are often a source of strength. For example, when journalist Scott Pelley asked residents in one long-established New York community repeatedly struck with disasters what got them through the rough times, they emphasized what one woman called the “three F’s: family, friends, and faith. Everybody cares about each other.” We hear the same stories from victims of fierce tornadoes in Oklahoma.

People viscerally understand how valuable stable community ties can be, and no one should be surprised that citizens who live in (or even just recall) stable communities are prone to see immigration as threatening – and can become easy marks for elites trying to politicize their fears. Reformers wishing to protect immigrant rights would do well to find ways to respect, and work with, traditional community values. The responsible path to reform honors established values, while extending opportunities and rights to newcomers.

Read more in John D. Skrentny and Micah Gell-Redman, “Japan, the United States, and the Philosophical Bases of Immigration Policy.” *American Behavioral Scientist* 56, no. 8 (2012): 995-1007.