

The Challenge of Immigration:

When muddling through becomes policy

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Introduction

General perception: U.S. Immigration policy in disarray

- Partly true: policy responses to illegal immigration
- Part overreaction & mistaking immigration policy for integration policy

U.S. has a relatively successful but under appreciated legal immigration policy

- More immigrants than rest of world combined
- Other countries have significant issues, e.g., France

**Where we have a muddled policy:
unauthorized immigration**

Last 25 years: about 50% from Mexico, 50% across land borders

- **Even without illegal immigration across land borders or Mexican undocumented immigrants, serious problem**

- **This distorted view has led to policy failure:**

Emphasis has been on stopping illegal entrants at Mexican border

Unauthorized population has grown dramatically in 25 years, from about 2.5 million persons in 1980 to about 10 million in 2005

Border Patrol has gone from 3,000 to nearly 10,000; enforcement budget from less than \$300 million to nearly \$1 billion

Border Patrol has made it harder to cross

. . . this just hasn't prevented growth of unauthorized immigrant population

Why not?

- Continental nation adopts an “island” enforcement policy
- Successful illegal entry depends not just on border enforcement, also on strategies by entrants; multiple entries
- Growth of population depends not only on successful illegal entry, also how many leave U.S. on their own
- Result: more enforcement, but explosive growth unauthorized population

Why this seemingly irrational policy?

Failed policies have political constituencies

- Nobody wants to really try employer sanctions
- Employer sanctions not likely to work well even with a national ID card
- Fining employers or catching illegals has little payoff
- Political trade-offs: Drug enforcement (1990s), anti-terrorism (since 2001)
- Emphasis on border everyone's favorite symbolic response

Fatal combination:

- Immigration policy secondary priority
- Design and implementation of immigration policy unusually complex

The challenges

We assume generous legal immigration policy will serve as ad hoc legalization for longer-term unauthorized immigrants

- **Only partially successful in 1990s**

Public support for increased border enforcement, not for legalization, guest workers, or interior enforcement

- **Symbolic politics has been “successful”**
- **Immigrants seen as a “problem” rather than as people who make contributions**
- **Tendency to blame immigrants for social problems that would exist without immigration**

Needed: Political leadership

Effective policy will require trade-offs and compromises

- **Additional, targeted enforcement; facilitating legal entry and legalization**
- **Recognition that immigrants generate some social costs and make important contributions**
- **Greater emphasis on admission of skilled immigrants**

Need to combine with other policies that affect integration of immigrants and improve opportunities for lower income U.S.-born workers

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Conclusion

¿Questions?

¡Gracias!

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