

Opening the Door: Migration and Self-Selection in a Restrictive Legal Immigration Regime

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Abstract

The 1965 Hart-Celler Act replaced the national origins quotas that had shaped U.S. immigration for four decades with an immigration system favoring family reunification. We examine how this system shapes migration and migrant characteristics by way of the large, temporary legalization programs authorized by the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 (IRCA). Exploiting cross-country variation in the magnitude of the IRCA legalization shock, we find that “opening the door” increased immigration through legal channels, but effects have been small: each IRCA admission was responsible for the admission of only 1 to 2 family members – mainly spouses and children – over the following 25 years. At the same time, unauthorized inflows from affected countries declined essentially one-for-one, leading to no net increase in new arrivals overall. We reject small increases in dependency ratios and use of public assistance among new arrivals, and can rule out even small declines in their educational attainment, suggesting no erosion in migrant self-selection. These findings suggest that expanding legal entry pathways to countries historically denied them may reduce challenges associated with unauthorized immigration. They are also inconsistent with popular claims that family-based legal immigration in the U.S. leads to run-away “chain” migration, large fiscal burdens, and poor migrant selection.

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