Impact Of Race, Ethnicity, And Immigration Policy: A Politico-Economic Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Recent proposals for a comprehensive immigration bill in the Senate may be based on political expediency. Sound bites about border security, worksite enforcement, and the status of about 12 million people who are currently in the United States illegally are salient issues to many politicians and various ethnic groups. There are over 12 million immigrants who are in the United States illegally and the majority of them are from Mexico due to their connected borders, thus making it easier access. The government wants to form new policies and laws to control the immigration to the United States. The House of Congress passed a bill that would make illegal immigration a criminal offense and would also make it a crime to help illegal immigrants migrate to the United States. For years now, the government has been trying to form new ways to improve immigration laws and assist illegal immigrants on gaining citizenship in the United States.

INTRODUCTION

*R*ecent proposals for a comprehensive immigration bill in the Senate may be based on political expediency. Sound bites about border security, worksite enforcement, and the status of about 12 million people who are currently in the United States illegally are salient issues to many politicians and various ethnic groups.

Immigration in this century has to contend with the new world order depicted by globalization. The United States is a global leader on Human Rights and also a major actor on the world stage. Immigration issues cannot be completely separated from human rights and the notion that the United States is the land of the free. Policies today should be able to encompass the way America addresses its domestic concerns with immigration and its image. Legislation that could seemingly have passed like the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 does not seem workable today, thus Congress has its work cut out. The color of America is different as a result of the change in the composition of the people inhabiting the United States. A comprehensive bill should be liberal enough to address this difference. Attempts to seal the western border are seen as measures to stem the ever-increasing number of new immigrants based on race and ethnicity. The overstated but undisputed claim about the United States is that it is a land of immigrants - a melting pot. The impact of immigration is the quintessential American experience, establishing a pattern that is replicated in almost every aspect of American life (Williams 1998).

Over the past decades, various policy changes have been used to profoundly alter the racial and ethnic composition of the United States, especially in major U.S. cities like Houston. One of these policy changes was the 1965 amendment to the 1962 immigration law. The challenge of race relations remains one of the most enduring and difficult issues confronting our nation, especially in Texas. Hence, the objective of this research study is to examine current immigration challenges and determine the impact of race and ethnicity factors influencing Houston's economic growth. More specifically, this study will highlight the effects of several relevant social and economic characteristics of the household, such as race, income, average number of children in the household of a given race, education of household race, and housing tenure on the economic growth of Houston.

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Literature Review

The United States Citizenship and Immigration Service provides citizenship to those who qualify, which takes about five years. All applicants must be 18 years of age or lawfully admitted to the United States for permanent residency. The United States Citizenship and Immigration Service requires certain qualifications to become an American citizen:

- Individuals who are allowed residency must show proof of their status.
- An immigrant must also show “good moral character” (Eugene, 2005).

There are many different things that can prohibit a person from receiving citizenship, such as: conviction of a crime, refusal to support dependents, and conviction of possessing illegal drugs. The applicant must provide their entire criminal history or their application will be disqualified. Also, all applicants who seek citizenship must be literate and have a lucid understanding of the English language.

There are a few exceptions. For instance, a person who has mental impairment or has a medically determinable physical and has been in the United States applying for permanent residency for about twenty years and over fifty years of age. Eugene (2005) suggested the next applicant must have a clear understanding of the United States Government and must be knowledgeable about American History. All of these things can be found in the study guide offered to the applicants. Finally, an applicant must take an “oath of allegiance” which is to support the Constitution and abide by the laws of the United States of America.

There are many negative factors that can cause an applicant not to receive citizenship. The question is, “If these are the qualifications to get citizenship, why are so many foreigners who qualify still not citizens of the United States?” Well, many foreigners are on working visas or have green cards, which allow immigrants to enter the United States for a variety of valid reasons, such as employment and international students who study abroad, etc. A visa can last four years and a green card (legal resident) lasts about ten years. There is a major conflict because there are many immigrants who are on visas that are awaiting citizenship due to the long process. Also there are many illegal immigrants who do not have visas and do not qualify for citizenship because of lack of money. In order to qualify for citizenship, applicants must either have a green card or a visa. An immigrant not only has to qualify for a visa or green card but must also be able to pay the fees. The main problem is there are numerous amounts of illegal immigrants who are working in the United States.

Illegal immigrants have made many contributions to the United States and Gerald (1996) noted that since 1990, immigrants have contributed to the job market in many ways: they fill an increasing share of jobs overall, they take jobs in labor in short supply regions, and they fill the types of jobs native workers often turn away from. Many illegal immigrants come to America because it is known as “The Land of Opportunity.” Mexico has the largest illegal immigrants in the country because it is closer to the United States. Most Mexicans flee to the United States because of poverty in their country. Many Mexicans who are not citizens of the United States send untaxed money back to their families in Mexico. The majority of the money that the Mexican government receives from their citizens is spent to pay the United States for Mexican purchases. Remember, one dollar in the United States equals ten pesos in Mexico. For instance in the Midwest, meatpacking drew a lot of immigrants and in the South Atlantic states, poultry processing jobs. Most immigrants make up a low percent of low-skilled jobs because they do not have a high school education.

Are immigrants taking jobs away from Americans? Well, they may not necessarily take jobs away, but they definitely help some corporations increase their revenue. For instance, Wal-Mart is the largest retail store in America and makes up about one-tenth of United States’ retail revenue. In March of 2005, Wal-Mart agreed to pay 11 million

dollars to settle federal allegations for having undocumented immigrants to clean its stores over night. This shows that some companies are taking advantage of illegal immigrants to increase profits. It also contributes to the unemployment rate for Americans who want these jobs but are passed buy for cheaper labor. There is also a negative side for undocumented workers; i.e. the company will be held accountable for having undocumented workers and must pay fines to the government, but it is not held responsible if immigrants are sent back their homeland without pay because they are not citizens or legal residents of the United States.

Subsequently, illegal immigrants put a higher demand on government services. Many illegal immigrants are receiving welfare and public healthcare, which is one factor that causes taxes to increase. There are millions of undocumented immigrants who are getting public service. If they become legal residents or are provided visas, this could be a decrease on taxes. Recently, about 70 percent of drugs smuggled through the United States were from Mexico. This is just one of the major issues why the United States wants to protect its border and take more control of who is entering their country. Recent studies found that Mexicans are paying smugglers to cross the border, which is also having an impact on crime in the United States.

In 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement went into effect to improve trade relations between Mexico, Canada, and the United States. This was supposed to be the answer to help improve the economy for all three countries. The North American Free Trade Agreement has caused a lot of problems between United States and Mexico because labor workers fear losing their jobs to Mexicans. The Welfare Reform Act passed a law that made most legal immigrants not eligible. Therefore, Federal public assistance like food stamps and any other government assisting programs caused eligible immigrants to not Continue the process of citizenship.

Table 1: Immigration Trend In The United States

There are many non-profit organizations whose main objective is to help immigrants obtain citizenship. The League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC), the largest civil rights organization, is a non-profit organization that encourages legal residents of the United States to apply and attain citizenship. The organizations help provide information on applying for citizenship and to provide affordable housing and job opportunities for disadvantaged and low income families. It also helps Latinos transition into American life. LULAC's main objective is to counsel immigrants on getting citizenship or legal residents in the United States.

Table 2: Americans' Perception About Illegal Immigration

The United States government needs to implement a law that can help earn residency for undocumented workers or supply a guest worker program for those who reside out of the country. The data analysis from the chart concludes that by 2010 over 14 million people will be living in the United States. This also concludes that there will be a major problem with controlling who is coming into the country illegally. Government needs better control over its borders and a better process of prosecuting criminals who enter illegally.

Table 2 indicates how Americans feel about finding a better way to stop illegal immigration, which has a major impact on higher taxes that are deducted from the American citizens' paychecks and also puts a strain on providing for their own families. It also indicates that 68% of the American population does care about how illegal immigration is having a major impact on the economy and that more than 50% of the American population wants the government to find a better way to protect the United States.

CONCLUSION

History indicates that the population of the United States from the 18th century to present has gone through various phases of immigration policies which are more often than not used to address contemporary issues. Immigration policies have been characteristically a response to perceived threats in status quo. The need to formulate policy on immigration today, as it focuses the mutant immigrant population and racial and ethnic component, makes this generation of immigrants different. This difference, as observed trends have indicated, is based on race and ethnicity.

In conclusion, the government must imply a better system for allowing illegal immigrants entering the country. The government needs to elevate the qualifications and standards of giving immigrants citizenship green cards and visas. The English language should not be a clear understanding, but a requirement, for citizenship. The process of waiting for citizenship also needs improvement and the government needs to work on applying the laws that are implemented for both illegal and legal immigrants.

On the other hand, this issue has to be dealt with in a manner that is consistent with America's promise. The United States is a nation of immigrants, as depicted in the United States history, and the policy on immigration reform has to take this into consideration. America, as a world leader, also has to contend with global perceptions. Freedom and equality are reflected in their attitude towards immigration.

Concerns by natives about opportunities lost to illegal immigrants do not address the importance or the economic benefits of immigration on the American economy. There are two schools of thought driving the immigration issue: 1) Will America forever remain the welcoming nation it has been since the 1965 Immigration Act,

which opened up a liberal era allowing the influx of immigrants and their relatives? And 2) Will America become restrictive and xenophobic to immigrants?

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