

Yearning— to be Here

Some Economics of Immigration

At the start of every academic quarter I am faced with the same dilemma: far more students want to enroll in my courses than there are seats available in the lecture hall. Thus I am confronted with the classic economic problem: in a world of scarcity, how to choose. Or, in this instance, how to pick among, say, 50 claimants for the remaining 10 available spots. And allowing Student A to enroll means turning away Student B.

I could grant permission on the basis of first-come, or hold a lottery—drawing 10 names out of a baseball cap; each seems fair. I could consider prior performance—grades at Chicago or SAT scores to ensure I get to teach the best and brightest. How about auctioning off the spaces to the highest bidders, or reward a winning smile or cool sneakers? I could employ a quota system (five men and five women, one left-handed student, one vegan).

Maybe I could let currently enrolled students vote on whom they most want as classmates. Or toss out 10 consent slips and let students fight for them. And just possibly, unbeknownst to me, perhaps some less scrupulous individuals might be able to hack our computer system or forge my signature to gain entry.

BY ALLEN R. SANDERSON

Moving from this “micro” example to one of a more serious, challenging nature for the country: Annually, the United States allows about 1 million people to enter the country legally and, if given the option, there must be at least 100 million people a year who would rather be here than in their current home country and situation. So how do we choose in this one-in-a-hundred case?

Other countries use various filters to manage immigration. Some give strong priority for language proficiency; others consider what these potential new entrants can add to their nation’s economy, and still others employ criteria such as basic health, education and skill levels. Maintaining cultural values could also be a factor.

How should the U.S. go about it? Should we draw 1 million names out of a very large hat? Allocate by country of origin? Use age, health, skill set, education, and/or language criteria? Charge \$50,000 to live here? (Not as ridiculous as it might seem at first blush; we could loan the wannabes the money, and they would pay it back from earnings. Not unlike what we do with college loans.) And then how should we deal with would-be immigrants who attempt to enter, or are already here, illegally?



Why not welcome in those currently in the worst financial or personal circumstances if, after all, we want to rely on the humanitarian principle of improving the economic lot of the earth’s inhabitants? How about selecting those with the highest skill levels if we’re most concerned with continued economic progress and our standard of living? Why not choose those who are less likely to become a burden on our social services?

Whatever criteria we employ, there will be pluses and minuses. We, as many nations, face a greying of the population and lower birth rates, so immigration is one avenue to bolster our labor force and forestall the prospect of slower growth. And just as a country could have too few immigrants and thus benefit from larger numbers, there could also be too many. How would we determine which prospect we face currently? (Most evidence points to the U.S. being better off with higher immigrant totals, but not indiscriminately so.)

For the last 20 years or more, politicians have called for “comprehensive immigration reform”, a loaded term, without having engaged in the important public policy debates that must precede it. Instead, what we hear are terms and slogans like “undocumented workers” (“illegal aliens”), “mobs”, “asylum seekers”, “human traffickers”, “border security crises,” all carefully chosen to mask underlying special-interest or political agendas.

The commonplace assertion that “we are a nation of (legal?) immigrants” is largely correct. Certainly in our history this has been the case, at least until about 100 years ago when we started putting up some virtual walls and reduced the acceptable ceilings. But even today the United States has the largest number of immigrants of any country – about 20 percent of the world’s immigrant population resides here. And as a percent of our population, immigrants constitute the highest of any advanced economy. However, the last 50 years are unprecedented in terms of numbers and the demographic profiles of these arrivals.

Should the United States – or any nation – have the right to control its borders and choose with whom its citizens want to live, share, and work? Assuming an affirmative answer, we need to address the serious challenges of how many, who and why. □