
Democracy, open borders, and the rights of immigrant workers

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Abstract

Research on the “migration-development nexus” often highlights the positive impact of migration on various aspects of human development. From this perspective, increasing openness to immigrant workers in high-income countries constitutes a crucial policy goal. However, next to concerns about negative consequences such as the “brain drain” in sending-countries, normative theorists have pointed to the tensions between open borders and inclusive citizenship. In addition, previous research has uncovered certain trade-offs (i.e. negative correlations) between the openness toward labor immigration and the rights afforded to immigrant workers across labor immigration programs. In particular, Martin Ruhs (2013) has argued that there is a “price of rights” – that is, that expanding certain rights, especially social rights, to immigrant workers can come at the cost of closing the borders to more labor immigration. In this paper, I challenge the view that, across high-income countries, these trade-offs exist independently of the political regime. I contend that, due to the higher dispersion of political power, the fundamentally different meaning of citizenship and human rights, and other “liberal constraints”, in democracies these trade-offs virtually disappear. Using a selection of original data from Ruhs (2013) and employing multivariate regression models to scrutinize 80 labor immigration programs across 34 high-income countries, the empirical analysis supports this claim. I show that, while in the most democratic contexts there appear to be no trade-offs at all, the negative association between openness and rights can become rather strong in high-income autocracies, where openness is clearly prioritized over rights. This means that policy-makers in immigrant-receiving democracies and migrant-sending countries, as well as normative political theorists who are concerned with justice in democratic systems, do not need to worry so much about potential openness-rights trade-offs. In high-income democracies, relatively high levels of openness can indeed be combined with relatively high levels of rights.