

## **UNANTICIPATED CONSEQUENCES: American immigration before and after the 1965 policy reform**

The 1965 Immigration Act transformed US immigration. In the following decades, the number of immigrants doubled and the share coming from Europe dropped from around half to 10%.

The 40-year surge in immigration has spawned endless debate about its effects on non-immigrant Americans, but little analysis of how and why it originated. In a study to be presented to the NORFACE migration conference at University College London this week, Professor **Tim Hatton** argues that the consequences of the 1965 reform can be understood in retrospect, even though they were largely unanticipated.

In particular, he notes that as immigrants from Latin America and Asia established a presence, the power of family reunification began to work. Hatton estimates that every for every 100 recent (legal) immigrants from Latin America, 44 more arrived in the next five years.

For Asian immigrants the figure is 40, but for Europe it is only 13. So although Europeans formed the bulk of the original immigrant stock, they accounted for less and less of the inflow.

Why wasn't this anticipated at the time? Professor Hatton says:

‘To some degree it was, but policy reform didn't work the way most people had expected. Immigration from poor countries near and far quickly gained momentum. And the previous half century's experience provided no basis for anticipating this new reality.’

So what happened and why? Based on some of the same motives that fuelled the Civil Rights Act a year earlier, the 1965 Act levelled the playing field by abolishing the country of origin quotas that massively favoured immigrants from Britain, Ireland and Germany.

But the legislators of the day argued that the effects would be modest. One of the Act's main proponents, Senator Edward Kennedy, argued that ‘[It] will not flood our cities with immigrants. It will not upset the ethnic mix of our society. It will not relax standards of admission. It will not cause American workers to lose their jobs.’

Others were less sanguine but such sentiments seemed more credible then than they do now, and for three reasons:

- \* First, visas for employment were radically cut and the skill requirements were ostensibly tightened, a measure many thought would screen out fresh immigration from poor countries.
- \* Second, the new system placed unprecedented weight on family reunification, something it was thought would help preserve the existing ethnic mix.
- \* And third, a cap was placed on immigration from elsewhere in the Americas, notably Mexico.

It didn't quite work out like that, for several reasons. One is that presidents from Truman to Reagan used their executive authority to admit refugees outside the immigration quota – increasingly from non-European origins such as Cuba and Vietnam.

Another is that those from south of the border gained rights to family reunification they had previously been denied. Some did manage to get employment visas and even more arrived illegally.

ENDS

'American Immigration Before and After the 1965 Policy Reform' by Professor Timothy Hatton (Australian National University and University of Essex)