

Backlash: The Last Refuge of an Immigration Moderate

Moderately pro-immigration thinkers often worry about “backlash.” Tyler Cowen’s the most energetic worrier, but Tim Kane said the same at my Cato book party. Backlash is what you bring up when none of the popular complaints about immigration make sense to you. Then you get meta and reflect, “Immigration does have one serious cost: it inspires bad arguments. Such arguments could ultimately lead to bad policies.”

The strange thing about the backlash argument is that the mechanism is totally general: “If you push X too far, you will – rightly or wrongly – upset the opponents of X. They could be so upset that you actually get less X.” Yet backlash to immigration is virtually the only form of policy backlash that anyone fears.

Which leads to an obvious question: Where are the *other* backlashes?

There has been some discussion of #MeToo backlash. Yet as far as I can tell, no one worries that #MeToo will ultimately increase sexual harassment.

There has been some talk of globalization backlash. Yet again, who claims that pushing globalization too hard actually leads to *less* globalization?

What gives? The simplest story is that backlash against immigration is *vastly* stronger than backlash to virtually everything else in the universe. However, there’s no evidence for this extraordinary claim – and as far as I know, even the vocal proponents of the immigration backlash story have never made it.

Another possibility is that immigration is only the tip of the backlash iceberg. Big backlashes are all over the political landscape; we’ll find a bunch as soon as we start looking.

Good luck with that!

The more plausible story, finally, is that (a) the case for radical immigration liberalization is intellectually solid, but (b) most thinkers dislike advocating anything radical. Low-quality thinkers can escape this bind by casually embracing low-quality arguments. Higher-quality thinkers, however, have to scrounge around for a meta-argument. When you know the critics of immigration are wrong, you warn, “Immigration is making the critics of immigration angry – and they might do something bad.”

To which the obvious reply is, “How bad? Worse than the enormous harms of the immigration restrictions already on the books? Highly unlikely.”