

Covid Migration: Why the Asymmetry?

During Covid, the U.S. reverted to our old tradition of federalism – and then embraced gubernatorial dictatorship. As result of this strange and shocking institutional revolution, the U.S. witnessed a dramatic rise in policy variance. Some parts of the U.S., like Florida and Texas, returned to near-normalcy in a matter of months. Others, like California and New York, became and remain soft police states.

We’ve now spent the better part of two years arguing about which states have the best policies. Due to this resurgence of federalism, however, U.S. residents can do much more than bicker. They can opt for **self-help**. If you think Covid policy in your area is too strict, you can move to a laxer state. If you think Covid policy in your area is too lax, you can move to a stricter state. To this extent, you’re free to choose.

Logically speaking, net migration could easily flow from lax states to strict states. (“Get me out of this death trap!”) But at least to me, it seems like the opposite is the case. Lots of people move from strict states to lax states. Hardly anyone goes the other way.

The obvious counter, however, is that I live in an anti-lockdown bubble. In total, I’ve spent about five months of Covid *away from home*, always in search of greater freedom and sociability. It’s only natural, then, that I would know a lot of freedom-seekers – and hardly ever meet security-seekers. Indeed, since security-seekers keep to themselves, they rarely even meet each other.

What’s really going on? As usual, no decent data googles, so I decided to run some informal surveys. Results:

How many people do you personally know who have moved in order to live with fewer Covid rules?

— Bryan Caplan (@bryan_caplan) November 30, 2021

How many people do you personally know who have moved in order to live with more Covid rules?

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22% of people know someone who migrated for laxer rules, but only 7% know someone who migrated for stricter rules, for a ratio of over 3:1. Quite consistent with my experience. Assuming the difference is genuine, what explains it? The leading possibilities:

1. Young people are more intrinsically willing to move, and are net losers from Covid regs because their personal risk is low.
2. Deep down, people care more about freedom than security. Since actions speak louder than words, people's rhetoric (and voting) are much more pro-regulation than their locational decisions. This arguably violates Hanania's rule that the left cares more about politics than the right, but still seems plausible.
3. The risk-averse want more Covid regs. But risk-averse people also dislike *change*, and moving is a huge life change. As a result, the people with the most to gain from moving to Covid-strict states are the most reluctant to move *anywhere*.

If you know of any relevant evidence, I'm all ears.