

Students for Liberty Open Borders Debate: My Opening Statement

Saturday I once again debated the Center for Immigration Studies' Mark Krikorian on open borders, this time for the Students for Liberty regional conference at the University of Maryland. Here's my opening statement.

RESOLVED: The United States should Pursue a Policy of Open Borders.

1. Under open borders, all human beings, regardless of citizenship, are free to work for willing employers, rent from willing landlords, and buy from willing vendors. It's a simple deduction from the basic libertarian principle that government should not interfere with capitalist acts between consenting adults.
2. The only *principled* libertarian objection to this is that the citizens of each country are its rightful owners, so they're entitled to regulate migration as they see fit.
3. But if you believe this, there is no principled libertarian objection to *any* act of government: You can't move into my house without my consent, but you also can't open a store in my house without my consent, practice your religion in my house without my consent, preach libertarianism in my house without my consent, or live in my house without paying me all the rent I demand. If citizens are the rightful owners of the country, they have every right to regulate and tax any aspect of life they like.
4. Fortunately, the belief that citizens are countries' rightful owners is crazy. The social contract is an utter myth. Contracts require unanimous consent, and no country has ever had unanimous consent.
5. Of course, most libertarians - including me - grant that if the consequences of specific libertarian policies are terrible, we should make an exception. It's a big tent; you don't have to be a strict libertarian on *everything* to qualify as a libertarian. But open borders is *not* a case where an exception is justified.
6. Why not? For starters, we should remember that preventing someone from moving to his preferred country is not a minor inconvenience like a parking ticket. It's a *severe* act of government coercion. Imagine you could either be stuck in Haiti for the rest of your life, or be literally enslaved with probability x . What value of x makes you indifferent? 10%? 20%? 30%? I'm not saying immigration restrictions are as bad as slavery; but if for the billions born in places like Haiti, our restrictions are at least 10% as bad as slavery.

7. What about the broader effects of immigration? Standard economic estimates say that open borders would have *massive* economic benefits – roughly DOUBLING global production. How? By moving billions of workers from countries where their labor produces little to countries where their labor produces a lot. Just look at how much a Haitian’s wages rise the day he arrives in Miami.

8. What about fiscal effects? Milton Friedman famously warned that “You cannot simultaneously have free immigration and a welfare state.” But I’ve looked closely at the numbers, and Friedman was just wrong. If you’re curious, check out the latest National Academy of Science estimates.

9. What if immigrants come and vote for statist policies? I’ve looked at the numbers. Immigrants are more economically liberal and socially conservative than natives, but the differences are modest, and immigrants don’t vote much anyway. And immigrants are much more libertarian than natives on one important dimension: support for free immigration. Today’s immigrants *are* much more Democratic than natives, but if you ever thought that Democrats were dramatically worse for freedom than Republicans, I hope the last year has changed your mind.

10. I generally avoid poetry, but today I’ll make an exception. The government decrees that fellow human beings can’t live or work here without proper papers – papers that are almost impossible for most people on Earth to ever obtain. It treats them as criminals for terrible offenses like shining shoes on the streets of Miami or picking fruit in the fields of California. If libertarians won’t stand up for the rights of these literally oppressed people, we stand for nothing and we are nothing.