James Feigenbaum   Benjamin Schneer   Maxwell Palmer   June 12th, 2025

Legislators who descend from immigrants historically supported more permissive immigration policies

0 comments

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Recent years have seen dramatic shifts in Americans' attitudes towards immigration, with a majority now favoring decreasing immigration levels. But in what is often called a "nation of immigrants", how do the immigrant histories of lawmakers in Congress affect how they set immigration policy? In new research, **James Feigenbaum**, **Benjamin Schneer** *and*

Maxwell Palmer *examine how lawmakers' own family histories of immigration affect their policy choices on the issue. They find that legislators with a family immigrant history cast more pro-immigration votes and speak more favorably about immigration in Congress.*

From the suspension of the refugee admissions program to pausing student visas to increasingly aggressive deportations, immigration policy questions dominate today's headlines and mark a new and contentious chapter in the ongoing fight over who can live and work in America. Understanding what drives shifts in immigration policy is crucial for making sense of both past and present immigration debates. Polls indicate that most Americans now would like to see decreasing immigration levels. While this may seem like a sharp turn—only five years ago fewer than 30 percent of Americans favored such a stance—it also continues a long-running pattern of change between expansive and restrictive immigration regimes in the United States. At the same time, in a country which has been considered by its own people for decades to be a "nation of immigrants," if you go back far enough in time, almost everyone has a connection to immigrants, immigration, or the forced movement of people from elsewhere, including most of the lawmakers setting immigration policy.

We wanted to understand how these dual realities of America's immigration politics —pressure for harsh restrictionism alongside enduring immigrant identities—drive immigration policymaking in Congress. In new research, we examine how lawmakers' personal connections to immigration might influence their policy choices and orientation towards immigration in Congress.

Tracing family immigration histories in Congress

While only a small percentage of today's members of Congress are immigrants themselves (Figure 1), many more have foreign-born parents or grandparents. During the early 20th century, more than 30 percent of representatives in the House had at least one foreign-born parent, and an even greater share had at least one grandparent born abroad. To examine this phenomenon at scale, we linked legislators to historical census data from 1880 to 1940, allowing us to trace congressional family histories across generations. We combine our data on family histories (where legislators' parents and grandparents were born) with measures of legislative behavior, including roll-call votes on landmark immigration legislation, all legislation related to immigration, and speeches recorded in the *Congressional Record*. Our period of study spans an important era for US immigration policy, encompassing landmark legislation from Chinese exclusion in the late 19th century to the border restrictions of the 1920s. It

culminates in the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, which reshaped American immigration policy for the next 60 years.
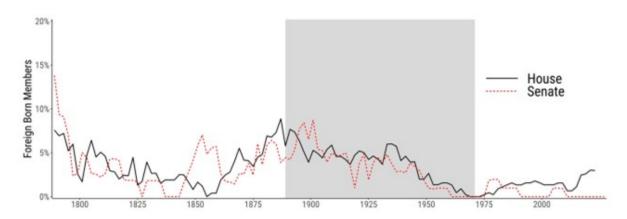
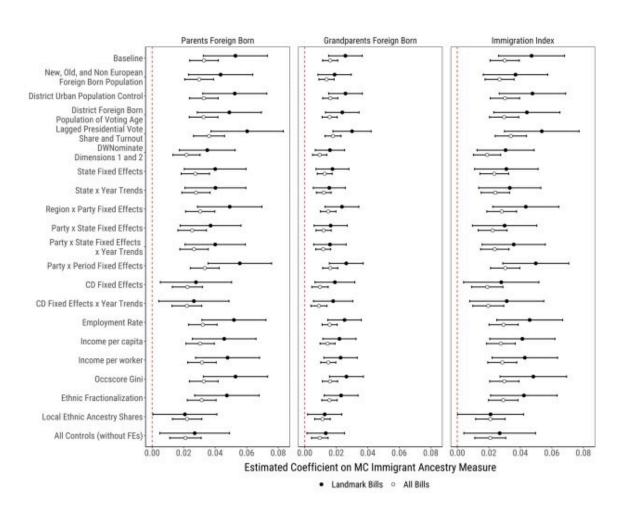**Figure 1 – Foreign-born members of Congress, 1789–2018**

Note: This figure illustrates the percentage of foreign-born members in the US House of Representatives (solid black line) and in the US Senate (dashed red line). Members if Congress' (MC) birthplace are drawn from the Biographical Directory of the United States Congress. The period studied in this article is denoted with a gray box. While MC birthplace is relatively simple to collect for this period, tracing foreign-born family history requires additional sources like linking to the complete count censuses. With some notable exceptions (e.g., in the 1850s) the House has tended to have a larger share of foreign-born members than the Senate. From the 1870s to the 1930s, both chambers of Congress reached or surpassed 5 percent of all members as foreign born. Since then, both chambers have seen sustained declines.

Personal background vs. Electoral calculations

When confronting immigration votes, legislators balance the demands of their constituents with their own ideology (and perhaps their own ancestry). But disentangling these factors is challenging because lawmakers are not randomly assigned to constituencies; they are elected by them. We took a variety of approaches to understand the roles of constituents and ideology, including using a rich set of controls including factors such as the immigrant composition and economic characteristics of the constituencies, references to immigration in local newspaper reporting, and opinions on immigration captured by historical polling data. We also used a statistical method to compare districts that narrowly elected a representative with or without an immigrant background, in effect holding district composition constant.

The results are clear: as Figure 2 shows, legislators with a family immigrant history cast more pro-immigration votes. They also speak more favorably about immigration in speeches on the floor of Congress. Importantly, our findings show that *international* immigration specifically matters, not just migration in general. Legislators with histories of domestic migration *within* the United States do not exhibit the same pro-immigration behavior as those with international immigrant backgrounds.

Figure 2 – Robustness of immigration history and member of Congress' vote choice

Note: This figure reports results from regressing an indicator for pro-immigration roll call votes on family immigration history. We report the coefficient on the MC immigration history variable with 95 percent confidence intervals. The black points indicate models using landmark immigration legislation and white points indicate models using all immigration bills. In the first row (baseline), the estimates include bill fixed effects and a variable indicating whether the member was in the House or in the Senate, as well as congressional district foreign-born population, total population, Black population, MC party, census region, and quadratics in age and tenure. The baseline controls are included in all results. In the second row, we include three controls for the log of the foreign-born population from New Europe, Old Europe, and non-Europe in each district. In the third row, we include controls for the log of the urban population in each district. In the fourth row, we include a control for the size of the foreign-born voting-age population. Next, we include a control for the vote share for the Democratic candidate in the most recent presidential election to control for district political preferences (along with controls for presidential turnout). Remaining rows report additional robustness checks.

While legislators with immigrant backgrounds generally favored more permissive immigration policies, we discovered important nuances that mirror some aspects of today's politics. When legislation has targeted restrictions towards specific nationalities, members with family histories from the countries that are targeted strongly opposed such measures. However, legislators with immigrant backgrounds from non-targeted countries were less intensely opposed to the restrictions. Thus, under some conditions, even those closer to the immigrant experience are not beyond "pulling up the ladder" behind them.

Why do immigrant-descended members of Congress take more permissive stances on immigration policy? We explore a variety of explanations, but the one with the strongest evidence involves group identity. For example, immigrant-descended lawmakers chose culturally specific first names for their children even before entering Congress, indicating some attachment to groups linked to their source country. When immigrant-descended members of Congress spoke about immigration in Congress, they used terms (such as referring to family) that personalized the policy topic. They also spent less time making economic arguments about immigration compared to members of Congress who did not have an immigrant family history.

Implications for today's immigration debates

Our research also challenges narratives about immigration politics being driven only by party ideology. Historically, at least, representatives with immigrant backgrounds could serve as moderating voices on immigration policy, even as public opinion shifted toward favoring decreased immigration levels. Family history, we think, also adds to the reasons why immigration policy is likely to continue to be a site of contestation for the

foreseeable future. As second and third generation immigrants join Congress and bring their experiences to the legislature, these effects are likely tempered by the increasing distance from the experience of immigration among other parts of the population.

- *This article is based on the paper* *"Descended from Immigrants and Revolutionists": How Family History Shapes Immigration Policy Making"* *in the Quarterly Journal of Economics.*

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About the author

James Feigenbaum

James Feigenbaum is an Assistant Professor in the Boston University Department of Economics. He is also a Faculty Research Fellow at the NBER in the Development of the American Economy program and a Faculty Affiliate at BU's Center for Innovation in Social Science. He studies economic history, labor economics, and political economy.

Benjamin Schneer

Benjamin Schneer is an Assistant Professor of Public Policy at Harvard Kennedy School. His research is in American politics and focuses primarily on political representation: how citizens express their preferences, how government responds to them, and what may shape and distort these processes.

Maxwell Palmer

Maxwell Palmer is an Associate Professor in the Boston University Department of Political Science, a Civic Tech Fellow in the Faculty of Computing & Data Sciences, and a Faculty Fellow at the Initiative on Cities. He studies Congress, electoral institutions and local politics, with a focus on how institutions and rules impact representation and policy outcomes.

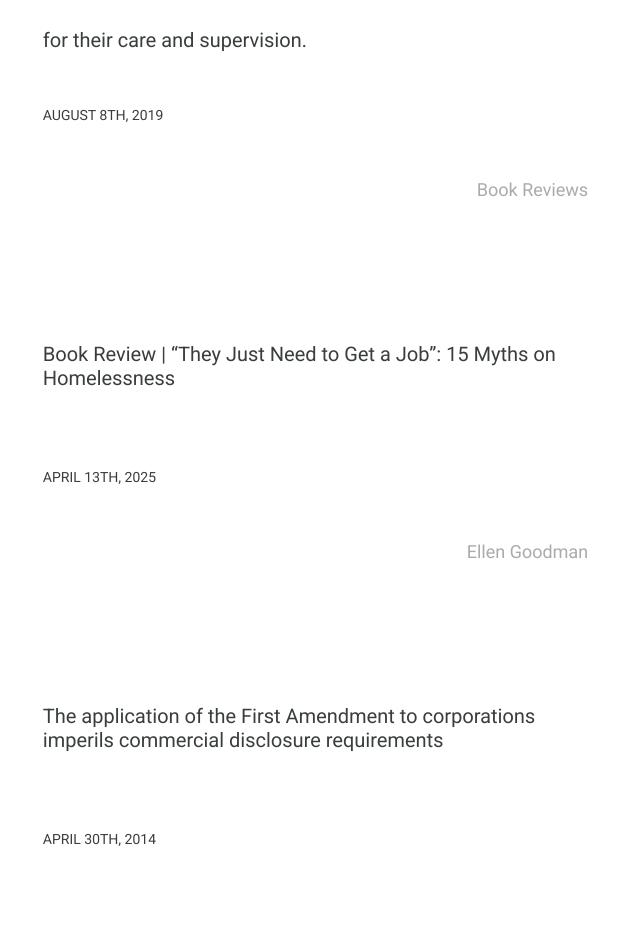**Posted In:** Justice and Domestic Affairs

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