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State Policy and Immigrant Integration

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Keywords

integration, immigration, policy evaluation, multiculturalism, citizenship, labor market

Abstract

The proliferation of government policies to manage immigration has led to the emergence of an interdisciplinary literature that evaluates policy effects on immigrant integration. This review synthesizes findings from evaluations of policies regulating legal status and citizenship, the labor market, welfare, settlement, education, and cultural rights. It concludes that policies lowering immigrants' costs of adjustment to the host country are consistently more effective in promoting integration than policies incentivizing immigrant effort through withholding resources and regulating access to rights. Policy changes the behavior of both immigrants and native-born citizens through material and psychological pathways, and considering the decision making of each side and their interdependence is crucial for understanding why estimated effects of the same policy differ across contexts and for anticipating unintended consequences. For external validity and useful counterfactuals, a closer connection is needed between empirical research and theoretical models that explicitly account for the equilibrium nature of integration.

INTRODUCTION

Immigration is one of the major political challenges facing developed democracies today. At the turn of the twenty-first century, the foreign born accounted for 13.5% of the total population in the United States and for over 15% in European countries such as Germany, Sweden, and Switzerland. Since 2015, conflict in the European periphery brought over 6.5 million refugees to EU countries. Rapid demographic change puts pressure on labor markets and increases cultural heterogeneity, which can undermine social cohesion. In response, many governments take an active role in managing immigrant and refugee arrivals by implementing a wide range of policies, from language training and job assistance to bans on employment and free movement, and from accommodation of cultural difference to regulations of public expressions of religiosity.

Concurrently with the proliferation of government policies, an interdisciplinary literature emerged to evaluate their effects on immigrant integration. Early studies compared immigrant outcomes across countries, attributing any differences found to differences in countries' integration regimes (e.g., Ersanilli 2010). Later approaches organized and quantified integration policies into indices, which were used in cross-country regressions to examine how specific policy bundles or policy dimensions influenced integration outcomes, holding constant differences in other observable country characteristics (see Goodman 2015 for a review). Despite constituting a substantive step forward, this literature's findings were mixed and hard to synthesize, partly owing to the challenges of drawing causal inferences from cross-country comparisons and partly because indices vary in the policies they focus on and the criteria they use for classification. Aided by methodological developments in the field of applied econometrics, a more recent wave of studies moved toward evaluating the causal effects of individual policies.

The first contribution of this article is to review this growing body of work that has used quasi-experimental research designs and other causal inference methods to estimate the effects of policy on immigrant integration, connecting it to earlier waves of scholarship. While necessarily selective, this review relies on a survey of over 200 studies in political science and related disciplines such as economics and sociology.¹ Although most of the world's immigrants and displaced people are in the global South, scholarship has mainly focused on the United States and Europe, where systematic integration policies were introduced earlier and where data for policy evaluation are more easily available. Policy categories examined by the literature span multiple domains: legal status and citizenship, welfare, the labor market, settlement, education, and cultural rights. For tractability, I choose to focus on policies targeting regular or irregular immigrants already present in a country. This leaves admission and selection policies outside the scope of this review, despite their important implications for integration.

The second contribution of this article is to synthesize the findings of this diverse literature in light of an equilibrium framework of integration, in which all involved actors—immigrants and host society members, whether explicitly targeted by policy or not—make interdependent decisions, which are influenced by policy through multiple channels. Scholars have noted that the lack of theoretical hypotheses for how policy translates into integration outcomes hinders the interpretation of work relying on policy indices (Goodman 2015). Progress in causal identification does not alleviate this concern, which continues to apply to studies relying on credible designs. To sketch a set of causal mechanisms behind policy effects, I begin from individual-level decision making driven by both rational cost–benefit calculations and psychological motives. Individual decisions are then scaled up into observed outcomes through feedback loops. This approach accounts for the fact that a given policy's effects are dependent on immigrant characteristics and

¹Of those, studies with an explicit causal design are listed in **Supplemental Table 1**.

other features of the country context, and can thus provide theoretical guidance for assessment of the external validity and replicability of individual policy evaluations.

After reviewing the literature within this framework, I conclude with takeaways and directions for future research. I argue that causal identification has significantly advanced our understanding of how policy affects immigrant integration. Better data and attention to causality have in several cases overturned conclusions one might draw from correlational analyses. More (and more careful) design-based studies are needed, particularly in policy domains where the bulk of evidence remains correlational, such as civic integration or cultural policies. However, causal identification alone is not enough to provide a full picture of the effects of policy. Without theoretical guidance, causal studies offer limited insights on the pathways for a given policy effect, which in turn limits the portability of their findings to different contexts. When causal evaluations of the same policy type diverge in their estimates, one cannot readily infer the reasons behind this difference. The literature would benefit from developing and incorporating an explicit theoretical structure behind statistical policy evaluations. With theory-driven replication across contexts and focused testing of mechanisms, we may begin to understand not only which policies work but also why.

INTEGRATION AS AN EQUILIBRIUM AND POLICY PATHWAYS

Integration is often viewed, explicitly or implicitly, as an outcome resulting from the interactions of immigrants and host country and society—an equilibrium. The National Academies of Sciences & Medicine (2015, p. 2) emphasize the “twofold” nature of integration by defining it as “the process by which members of immigrant groups and host societies come to resemble one another.” Integration failures, such as that of Muslims in France, are attributed to a “discriminatory equilibrium” whereby the majority discriminates against the minority and the latter responds with less cooperation (Adida et al. 2014). Other approaches, emphasizing knowledge, aspirations, capabilities, or resources (e.g., Lutz 2017, Harder et al. 2018), also implicitly incorporate an equilibrium view.² In this review, I ground this equilibrium framework of integration in individual decision making. On the one hand, immigrants make decisions by weighing costs and benefits of different actions, with components of this calculus being both material and nonmaterial. For example, they can decide whether to pursue language learning, weighing the benefits of language knowledge against monetary and time costs, which may vary by linguistic distance or level of education. On the other hand, both immigrant choices and their outcomes are conditioned by institutional constraints and the attitudes and behaviors of host society members. For example, whether language skills will translate into labor market integration partly depends on the degree to which employers discriminate against foreigners.

Empirically, and despite heterogeneity across studies, many commonly employed measures of integration reflect the equilibrium nature of the process. For instance, measures of labor market integration such as employment rates or earnings reflect both immigrant investments in skill and job search efforts and native employers’ preferences and hiring practices. To accommodate the heterogeneity in the literature, this review adopts an expansive empirical definition of integration and covers studies that use a wide variety of proxies across several of the dimensions standardized by Harder et al. (2018)—psychological, economic, political, social, linguistic, and navigational. The

²Models of integration differ on the relative emphasis they place on the actions of either side. Multiculturalist approaches emphasize the dismantling of barriers to full participation (Kymlicka 2012) and consequently place more of the weight for integration outcomes on the host countries, which are expected to accommodate cultural difference. Assimilationist approaches place more weight on the actions of immigrants, emphasizing requirements for linguistic and cultural adjustment. Clearly, these weights can be normative and driven by underlying preferences for different social ideals.

actual decisions and interactions of relevant actors may vary depending on the dimension considered. For this reason, the various dimensions of integration do not need to correlate positively and may sometimes even move in opposite directions (Maxwell 2012).

Policy then affects integration in several ways. First, it changes the cost–benefit calculation of immigrants, by altering returns to specific actions or limiting the set of possible choices. Because people have both material and nonmaterial considerations, policy may also trigger psychological responses. For instance, regardless of their material effects, policies perceived as discriminatory may trigger resentment and change immigrants’ desire to engage with the host country or society. Second, policy may change the behavior of the host society. The pathways may again be material or symbolic, and either direct (e.g., when a policy signals and legitimizes lower tolerance of newcomers) or indirect (e.g., when a policy triggers changes in immigrant behavior, which in turn affect the behavior of the host population toward immigrants). Finally, and further complicating the picture, policy that targets the behavior of one particular group (e.g., noncitizens) often has broader effects on the behavior of other groups (e.g., foreign-born citizens) in ways that can feed back into the outcomes of the targeted population and are sometimes unintended. The following section organizes the empirical literature around effects on different actors, distinguishing between different material and psychological pathways through which policy acts.³

EFFECTS ON IMMIGRANTS

Material Effects

I group material effects of policy into four categories on which sufficient literature exists: costs, incentives, barriers to access, and requirements for access.

Costs. Many policies aim at lowering the costs of immigrant actions, by reducing the money, time or effort necessary to find a job, interface with the bureaucracy, or collect information about navigating local life. If cost reductions are high enough to be meaningful, cost-reducing policies can be effective, provided that high costs—and not other institutional or societal barriers—are indeed the relevant bottleneck for successful integration. A body of work has developed on three types of policies that can be classified as cost reducing: active labor market programs (ALMPs), language courses, and educational interventions for immigrant students.

Active labor market programs. ALMPs encompass a range of interventions aimed at facilitating immigrant access to the labor market. These include job training, assistance with job search, direct matches of employees to employers, and subsidized employment. Consistent with meta-analyses in broader populations (Card et al. 2018) and with theoretical expectations on cost-reducing interventions, ALMPs have been shown to improve immigrant labor market integration. Joona & Nekby (2012) find evidence that personalized job support increases immigrant employment in Sweden. In Finland, Sarvimäki & Hämäläinen (2016) study the effects of an intensive individualized integration plan for unemployed immigrants, using the cutoff date for eligibility in a regression discontinuity (RD) design. They find no effect on employment, but positive effects on earnings and job quality. Battisti et al. (2019) conduct a randomized control trial assigning refugees to job-matching support in Germany and find positive effects on employment one year after the intervention, particularly for the most vulnerable participants, such as those with lower

³This is not an exhaustive enumeration of channels. For instance, one important additional mechanism concerns the entry of new immigrants. Policy may trigger compositional changes that affect integration directly and through downstream effects on the choices and outcomes of immigrants and native-born citizens already present in a country.

education or with pending asylum decisions. A host of other studies evaluate more multidimensional ALMPs, finding positive effects on employment and earnings (see **Supplemental Table 1**).

Language courses. Evaluations of adult language courses consistently yield positive effects on various dimensions of integration. Arendt et al. (2020) exploit the discontinuity introduced by refugees' date of arrival, which affects eligibility for language training in Denmark. They find that language courses increase the probability of employment and years of schooling, and allow treated refugees to move to better-paid occupations that involve a communications component. These positive effects also spill over to the children of refugees, who become more likely to complete lower secondary education and less likely to commit crimes in adolescence (Foged et al. 2023). The benefits of language training are concentrated among refugees whose mother tongue does not use the Latin alphabet, consistent with linguistic distance acting as a cost to integration. Leveraging an alternative identification strategy based on the random assignment of refugees to Danish municipalities and the timing of opening and closing of language centers, Foged & Van der Werf (2023) confirm the positive effects of language training on language fluency, human capital acquisition, and integration into local communities. In a rare case of random assignment to language classes through a lottery among immigrants who applied for them, Heller & Slungaard Mumma (2023) find improvements not only on earnings, but also on political integration, measured as higher voter registration rates and turnout. They also estimate the contribution of two different channels to improved integration: language knowledge and network formation among participants in language classes.

Cost-reducing education policies. Policies that lower immigrant students' costs of effort in education have been shown to improve educational attainment. In the United States, the extension of in-state college tuition rates to undocumented immigrants increased high school completion and college enrollment rates (Kaushal 2008, Flores 2010). However, cost reductions in tuition rates are effective only when high enough to be meaningful. Chin & Juhn (2010) find weaker effects of such policies than other studies do, including null effects for many subgroups. They note that even if tuition fees are reduced, college attendance may remain prohibitively expensive for many undocumented immigrants. Furthermore, with strong barriers to labor market participation, the returns to college education for undocumented immigrants may be too low to warrant enrollment.

Carlane et al. (2022) investigate a different type of cost-reducing policy: tutoring and career counseling for immigrant students with high academic potential. In a randomized controlled trial in Italy, they find positive effects of the policy on academic track choice, cognitive skills, and career aspirations of immigrant boys, for whom an educational gap existed in the first place. Tutoring and counseling improve outcomes the most for students in the middle of the test score distribution. This is consistent with theoretical expectations; the achievement of the best-performing students is high even in the absence of targeted support, while worse-performing students may have too high constraints to benefit from the intervention. Cost-reducing policies are most efficient for immigrants facing intermediate costs, who are helped by the policy, but who would struggle in its absence.

Incentives. A second material pathway for policy effects is through incentive provision. Theoretically, this channel works like a reduction in costs: If incentives are strong enough, and if low effort on the part of immigrants is the only hindrance to integration, incentives can improve integration outcomes. Empirically, however, few policies affect incentives without simultaneously also modifying immigrant decision making in other ways. Most policies incentivize effort by making access to rights or resources conditional on immigrant behavior, and thus concurrently change both incentives and resources available to immigrants. I discuss three types of policies that affect incentives, alongside other aspects of immigrant choices and constraints: withholding resources to

incentivize integration effort, with the generosity of social benefits as a salient example; regulating access to rights; and adjusting the stringency of requirements for granting various forms of legal status.

Generosity of welfare. An influential study by Koopmans (2010) observed that unemployment rates, residential segregation, and crime rates were highest in European countries that combined generous welfare systems with policies of multiculturalism. Generous welfare was argued to limit immigrants' incentives to find employment and encourage them to remain socially and culturally isolated from the majority.

Later causal studies reveal a more nuanced picture. In Denmark, "Start Aid" reduced social assistance to refugees entering the country after July 1, 2002. Using an RD design, Huynh et al. (2007) find large positive employment effects, indicating that the reform was successful in incentivizing quick entry into the labor market. Rosholm & Vejlin (2010) confirm this finding but also find transitions out of the labor market for some refugees during the first eight months in the country.

Less generous benefits may incentivize job-seeking efforts but also reduce the resources available to immigrants, with an overall ambiguous effect on integration. Andersen et al. (2019) revisit the case of Danish Start Aid. While they confirm that the reform increased employment and earnings, the reduction in welfare benefits lowered refugees' disposable income and increased their involvement in crime. Children whose parents were affected by the reform had lower educational attainment and worse school performance. Arendt et al. (2020) examine a later short-lived reform that reduced welfare benefits to certain groups of refugees, finding similar negative effects on disposable income and increased probability of shoplifting. Exploiting differences in the generosity of cash benefits given to refugees across US states, LoPalo (2019) finds that, conditional on employment, more generous benefits increase wages and the quality of jobs found by refugees.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that welfare generosity acts as an incentive on a very limited dimension of integration: employment outcomes. At the same time, more rapid transitions into employment may lower the quality of jobs that immigrants find, which, combined with lower benefits, reduces disposable income and affects multiple other dimensions of integration, often with intergenerational implications. Importantly, even the incentivizing effect of welfare on employment has heterogeneous effects, with more educated immigrants being more able to respond to incentives provided by such policies (Rosholm & Vejlin 2010).

Barriers to access. Policy may also directly regulate immigrants' access to rights and various forms of participation in a country's economic, political, and social life. At a basic level, imposing barriers to full participation mechanically reduces integration. At the same time, permeable barriers to access, which can be overcome conditional on immigrant actions, may incentivize behaviors conducive to integration. For instance, noncitizens are often excluded from public sector jobs and from political participation. While this may limit their political and economic integration, it also incentivizes them to fulfill the requirements for obtaining citizenship precisely in order to gain full access to the polity and the labor market, and to reap the positive downstream effects such access implies. Consequently, lower barriers to access may not always improve integration; the outcome depends on the balance between resource deprivation and the motivation to demonstrate integration to overcome the barriers. The stronger the exclusion effect of a policy regulating access, or the less conditioned the permeability of the barrier on immigrant actions, the more likely the policy is to hamper integration.

Policies regulating access also have highly heterogeneous effects. Not only is the effect of exclusion stronger for immigrants who start off with fewer resources, but also any incentivizing effect of such policies is nonlinear. Immigrants with high costs of effort—those with limited economic

resources, low education, or high cultural distance—find it hard to comply with requirements for access and are more likely to give up on any effort to integrate. This is particularly likely if access to a particular type of rights or domain of life forms the prerequisite for further broader integration. For instance, in countries where many rights and privileges are reserved for citizens, immigrants unlikely to meet the requirements for naturalization despite their best efforts face lower returns to other forms of investment, such as language learning and skill acquisition. High barriers may thus have a motivating effect for immigrants with lower costs or more resources and a demotivating effect for more marginalized subgroups.

The theoretical ambiguity on the effects of such regulatory policies is reflected in the mixed findings of the empirical literature and in prominent academic and policy debates, such as on the role of citizenship.

Employment bans. Many European countries restrict access to the labor market for asylum seekers by means of employment bans. These bans apply during the period of the asylum application process and are lifted once the applicant is granted refugee status. Because there is no conditionality attached to them, employment bans represent a pure case of resource deprivation with no incentivizing effect. During the wait period, the reduction in employment is mechanical, but studies also identify a negative long-run effect. Marbach et al. (2018) study a court-mandated change in the duration of employment bans in Germany and find that longer bans reduce long-run employment and the probability of actively looking for a job. Using a difference-in-differences design across European countries, Fasani et al. (2021) also find that employment bans lower labor force participation, the quality of jobs held by refugees, their language skills, and their health outcomes, while increasing the likelihood of welfare reciprocity. Jointly, these studies suggest that the effect of bans is to demotivate refugees seeking to integrate in the labor market. This scarring effect is stronger for bans affecting refugees directly after arrival and for those with lower education. Qualitative work additionally indicates that employment bans may push asylum seekers into informal employment and illegality, with possible long-run effects on their integration even after the bans are lifted (Carciotto 2021).

Legal status. Withholding legal status reduces integration by formally barring immigrants from access to the labor market and resources such as social services. At the same time, the conditionality of status incentivizes efforts, such as maintaining continuous full-time employment, that will allow transitions from more to less precarious categories of membership.

The majority of empirical work has studied the effects of granting legal status in the context of regularization of irregular immigrants through amnesty-type programs. Because undocumented status implies exclusion from basic rights and resources, the estimated effects of amnesty are generally positive. In the United States, studies find increased employment (Pan 2012) and earnings (Amuedo-Dorantes et al. 2007) for immigrants eligible for regularization based on the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986 or for protection from deportation and work authorization based on Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) (Pope 2016, Amuedo-Dorantes & Antman 2017). Consistent with an incentivizing effect of requirements for status acquisition, Pope (2016) finds that DACA-eligible individuals were pushed into obtaining a General Educational Development (GED) diploma, which was a requirement for benefiting from the program. Outside IRCA and DACA, Kaushal (2006) estimates an increase in employment and wages for immigrants who benefited from the Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act (NACARA), whereby nationals of certain countries of Central America and the former Soviet bloc were protected from deportation and faced an easier path to permanent residency.

Immigrants with lower costs of effort may be more able to immediately benefit from the effects of legalization. This is consistent with positive employment effects of regularization programs

being concentrated among the more highly educated (Kaushal 2006). At the same time, the exclusionary effect of undocumented status may be more binding for more marginalized immigrants, who consequently benefit more from status security. Pan (2012) finds that the impact of IRCA on employment and wages is strongest for highly educated men, but its effects on labor force participation are mainly concentrated on low-skill Latina women.

The flip side of increased formal employment as a result of regularization is a reduction in various forms of informal activities, including crime. One of the most consistent findings in the literature, confirmed in both the US and European contexts, is that regularization or enhancement in legal status security reduces income-generating crimes (see **Supplemental Table 1**). Additionally, the access to rights and resources, security, and longer time horizons following from formalization also translate into better psychological outcomes. DACA-eligible individuals are less likely to suffer from psychological distress (Venkataramani et al. 2017), and their children are less likely to be diagnosed with anxiety and adjustment disorders (Hainmueller et al. 2017b).

While most research finds positive effects of legal status on integration outcomes, a handful of studies suggest qualifications to this conclusion. Amuedo-Dorantes et al. (2007) find that IRCA increased unemployment among eligible men and reduced labor force participation among eligible women. One interpretation of these effects, which are concentrated among the lower skilled, is increased reliance on welfare benefits. Indeed, Cascio & Lewis (2019) show that California Metropolitan Statistical Areas with more unauthorized immigrants filed more income tax returns after IRCA, likely because low-income legalized immigrants claimed welfare transfers for which their new status made them eligible. In the context of Colombia, Bahar et al. (2021) find that work authorization for migrants had only a minimal effect on increasing formal employment.

One possibility highlighted by these findings is that legal status acquisition disincentivizes certain forms of immigrant effort. For instance, when the same level of earnings can be achieved by welfare reciprocity as by employment, immigrants may rely more on social transfers and stay away from the labor market. At the same time, the above studies are also consistent with the presence of informal barriers to labor market participation for status-eligible immigrants. If preferential hiring by employers remains a constraint to immigrants' formal employment, then reliance on benefits or informal employment may remain the only viable option.

Citizenship. A category of legal status that deserves special attention is citizenship (see Goodman 2023 for a review). Much of the discussion around citizenship has concentrated on whether it constitutes a catalyst of integration or a crown awarded to immigrants who have successfully and demonstrably achieved integration. This debate reflects the theoretical ambiguity attending regulatory policies that set barriers to access but make those barriers conditional on immigrant actions. From a theoretical point of view, there is merit on both sides of the debate.

On the one hand, citizenship dismantles barriers to full participation in a society. Countries reserve special rights and resources for citizens, such as public sector jobs, several categories of government benefits, and the right to vote and run for office. Allowing immigrants to access such resources can enable integration along various dimensions. Empirically, the causal evidence on the catalyst effect of citizenship is overwhelming. Studies that rely on quasi-random assignment to citizenship and overcome the problem of positive selection find that citizenship improves immigrants' social, political, and economic integration. Citizenship awarded to immigrant children has positive effects on their educational performance and attainment through, among other channels, increased investment in them by their foreign-born parents (see **Supplemental Table 1** for relevant studies).

The catalyzing effect of citizenship on integration should depend on how binding the barrier to full participation is for non-naturalized immigrants. Most studies find that citizenship has a

more positive effect on integration for more marginalized groups of immigrants, such as those with lower earnings (Hainmueller et al. 2019) or those likely to face higher discrimination due to their origin (Hainmueller et al. 2017a). The only credibly identified study to date that finds no effect of citizenship acquisition on any dimension of integration is by Hainmueller et al. (2023), who randomized fee vouchers for naturalization among low-income permanent residents in the United States. This finding stands in contrast to other evidence on the positive effects of citizenship, which mainly comes from the European context. One possibility is that the premium of citizenship relative to permanent residence is higher in Europe than in the United States because social barriers to noncitizens' full incorporation in society are more rigid. This would be consistent with the presence of significant discrimination on the basis of origin and perceived cultural assimilation in European countries (see, e.g., Hainmueller & Hangartner 2019). Future work should systematically link the citizenship premium to estimates of the magnitude of barriers to access, such as discrimination against noncitizens, across countries.

At the same time, citizenship status, and the rights and benefits it confers, can act as an incentive for integration effort. When the rights of noncitizens are restricted, immigrants are incentivized to seek naturalization and therefore comply with any integration requirements for achieving this status (for correlational evidence suggestive of this, see, e.g., Van Hook 2003 and Massey & Pren 2012). Clearly, the ability of immigrants to respond to such incentives depends on their costs and resources. Research suggests that those costs could even be monetary, as naturalization applications incur fees that not all immigrants can pay. Interventions that reduce these costs increase naturalization rates, particularly among low-income and low-education immigrants (Hainmueller et al. 2018, Hotard et al. 2019).

Welfare access. Restrictions on immigrants' eligibility for welfare benefits limit access to valuable resources and act as a barrier to integration. In 1996, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) denied immigrants who arrived in the United States after August 1996 all but emergency coverage in the first 5 years of their residency. At the same time, it devolved responsibility for public assistance programs to the states, creating variation in access to the social safety net across the country. Condon et al. (2016) use a difference-in-differences design and find that states that made public assistance more inclusive after the federal reform had higher high school graduation rates among young Latino and Asian students. Later work focused specifically on limitations to healthcare access documenting first-order effects on immigrant health. Swartz et al. (2017, 2019) exploited the staggered rollout of Emergency Medicaid extension to unauthorized immigrant mothers across counties in Oregon and found higher utilization of services and better health outcomes for both infants and mothers.

To the extent that welfare benefits are conditional on qualifying for certain types of legal status, they may also incentivize immigrants to transition to those categories of status. The effects of this channel are heterogeneous, as not all immigrants have the capacity to exert the effort required to become permanent residents or naturalize. Van Hook (2003) provided early correlational evidence that declines in welfare reciprocity among immigrants in the aftermath of PRWORA could be due to increases in naturalization, but empirical work examining the effects of welfare restrictions on citizenship acquisition remains limited.

Requirements for access. Countries set various requirements for allowing immigrants access to rights and resources. For instance, requirements for legal status acquisition may encompass length of residence in the country, successful completion of language courses or a naturalization test, or no dependence on welfare. Such behavioral targets encourage effort, but with heterogeneous effects, which can be demotivating for the most marginalized immigrants. Two policy types confirm

the ambiguous effects of conditionality: stricter requirements for permanent residence and civic integration policies.

Requirements for permanent residence. Arendt et al. (2021) examine a Danish reform that introduced stricter criteria for permanent residency in the form of a higher bar for the language test and more minimum years of cumulative employment. Comparing eligible to ineligible asylum seekers before and after the reform in a difference-in-differences design, they find results consistent with the theoretical expectation that stricter targets have heterogeneous effects and an ambiguous overall impact. Stricter requirements incentivized high-performance individuals—measured as those with more cumulative labor market experience prior to the reform—to pass the language test, but reduced success rates and subsequent labor market performance for lower-performance immigrants. A review of three other studies on permanent residency requirements in the context of Scandinavia (Arendt et al. 2022, p. 553) concludes that tightened rules for permanent residency can act as incentives for integration, but “only if the bar for obtaining permanence is not set too high.”

Requirements for civic integration. Civic integration comprises a category of policies that make various degrees of legal status, such as entry and permanent residence, conditional on civic requirements such as knowledge of the receiving country’s language, history, legal and political system, and values. These policies have proliferated in Europe since the 1990s in the form of integration contracts, mandatory language and civics training, and language and knowledge tests (Goodman 2012). Theoretically, requirements incentivize certain forms of integration effort, such as language learning. Failure to comply with requirements implies exclusion from legal status, with likely negative effects for downstream integration (Goodman & Wright 2015). Civic integration policies are thus expected to hinder acceptance and discourage effort for more marginalized immigrants, such as those from a non-Indo-European language family, those with limited language skills, the illiterate or less educated, and the elderly (Böcker & Strik 2011).⁴ The incentivizing effect of such policies is, in fact, limited to an intermediate category of costs of effort, since immigrants of particularly high education or language knowledge have no need for mandatory requirements to integrate linguistically (Böcker & Strik 2011, Goodman & Wright 2015).

Limited causal evidence exists on the effectiveness of civic integration policies. Correlational and cross-country studies yield mixed effects, and generally null effects for broader social and political integration (Goodman & Wright 2015, Neureiter 2019). Emeriau et al. (2022) offer a rare evaluation of a specific policy, France’s integration contract, using an RD design that exploits the policy’s staggered introduction across French municipalities. They find null effects on a wide range of integration outcomes. One possibility for this particular case is the weak nature of incentives offered by the policy: The contract consisted of a one-day mandatory civics class and the option to enroll in language courses, which was taken up by only 30% of participants. Future replications should systematically examine how the strength of incentives moderates the effects of civic integration policies, but so far, the evidence suggests limited effectiveness.

Symbolic Effects

Laws and policies affect behavior not only through what they do but also through what they say. A policy may signal the underlying attitudes of the society that enacts it and affect the behavior of the targeted group through psychological responses to such signals. This function of state policy, termed expressive (McAdams 2000) or symbolic, is seen by political scientists and sociologists

⁴Indeed, in light of this expectation for the outcomes of certain categories of immigrants, these policies are often explicitly introduced to serve as a screening mechanism for immigrant inflows rather than as a means of achieving integration (Böcker & Strik 2011).

as crucial for the process of integration. Indeed, scholars often categorize policies as inclusive or exclusive by considering primarily their symbolic functions rather than their material effects (Filindra & Manatschal 2020, Jiménez et al. 2021).

Policies that allow immigrants easier access to rights and economic and political participation are hypothesized to be inclusive in terms of their symbolic effects (Bloemraad 2013, Jiménez et al. 2021), hence increasing immigrants' perceptions of belonging and motivating them to invest in integration. A prominent example is citizenship policy. Access to citizenship may act as a signal of inclusion that may be able to disrupt the "discriminatory equilibrium" (Adida et al. 2014) in which immigrants perceive the host society as exclusionary and respond by alienation. In one of the clearest illustrations of this channel, Felfe et al. (2021) combine a lab-in-the-field experiment with an RD design and find that birthright citizenship increases the propensity of immigrant students in Germany to trust and cooperate with their nonimmigrant classmates.

Similar arguments have been put forward for civic integration policies. Strict requirements and tests signal exclusion and indeed are often perceived as exclusionary by immigrants (Böcker & Strik 2011). Lochmann et al. (2019) provide suggestive evidence on such channels in the case of France. Language training, offered as part of the completion of integration requirements, increased labor force participation and navigational integration (obtaining a driver's license) but lowered participants' likelihood of reporting that they felt at home in France and their interest in French politics. The language course included civic content pertaining to aspects of public life in France, such as the role of secularism and French values. This content may have had an alienating psychological effect on some immigrants, signaling the presence of high barriers to integration.

This result highlights that the symbolic and material effects of policy sometimes operate in opposite directions and that the two types of channels need to be distinguished. One example that illustrates the importance of this distinction is a study by Hilbig & Riaz (2022), who examine employment bans imposed on refugees in Germany. Because employed refugees were not subject to the ban, the policy's material effect was to incentivize employment. At the same time, its exclusionary character reduced refugees' psychological and social integration.

Spillovers

Besides its effects on the directly targeted group, policy may also have indirect or unintended effects on nontargeted groups of immigrants. Some of these spillovers are material. For example, interventions that improve the education outcomes of one group of immigrant students may have positive spillovers on their classmates (Carlana et al. 2022) or broader communities (Condon et al. 2016). Policies that target immigrant children have also been shown to affect the behavior and outcomes of their parents, as they enter parents' decision making with respect to their prospects in the country and future integration (Avitabile et al. 2013, 2014). Nontargeted immigrants may also adjust their expectations of certain policies applying to them in the future, or be treated differently by employers and neighbors who change their own behavior in response to a narrowly targeted policy. Studies show that policies targeting undocumented immigrants, such as heightened immigration enforcement or restrictions to welfare access, reduce uptake of welfare even among immigrants entitled to it (see **Supplemental Table 1**).

Many of the above effects are unintended. Because integration is an equilibrium outcome, even policies that are generally expected to improve integration—and indeed, often do for some groups of immigrants—may sometimes backfire, when the behaviors of families and communities not directly targeted by a policy respond in unexpected ways. Dahl et al. (2022) find that a reform in Germany that granted birthright citizenship to immigrants born after January 1, 2000, which otherwise had positive effects on immigrant students' academic achievement, lowered

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self-satisfaction, self-esteem, and social integration for Muslim girls. The reason behind this effect was likely a reaction of parents, who perceived the reform and the prospect of their daughters' integration as threatening to their cultural values and responded by investing less in girls' education and more in cultural retention.

EFFECTS ON THE HOST SOCIETY

An underappreciated pathway for the effect of integration policies is their impact on the behavior of the host population. Most directly, such an impact may work through expressive channels. Ethnographic work suggests that hostile policies may legitimize discriminatory treatment of immigrants and harden the boundaries between immigrants and host communities (Flores 2014). But laws may also trigger backlash; even policies of inclusion can generate negative reactions against immigrants, when they are perceived as preferential treatment or as redirecting resources away from natives. Williamson (2018) documents such a dynamic in US cities that introduced immigrant accommodation policies.

Policies may also send particular signals about the type of immigrants present in a society. Civic integration policies may, on the one hand, signal that immigrants granted legal status are deserving of acceptance because they have exerted effort and complied with requirements. Consistent with this, Neureiter (2022) finds that the presence of civic and language requirements increases support for the entry of Syrian refugees in the United Kingdom. On the other hand, the very need for introducing such policies may trigger perceptions of cultural distance. Relying on both a difference-in-differences design across European countries and a survey experiment in the United Kingdom, Alarian & Neureiter (2021) find no evidence that civic integration policies either improve attitudes toward immigrants or trigger anti-immigrant sentiment, possibly because opposing effects cancel each other out.

Such signaling dynamics may also play out in individual interactions between immigrants and host society members. Survey experiments in the United Kingdom and the Netherlands suggest that foreign-born citizens are perceived as more integrated (Sobolewska et al. 2017), but field experimental evidence in Sweden shows that citizenship does not ameliorate labor market discrimination based on national origin (Vernby & Dancygier 2019). Understanding when and how policy affects integration through the attitudes and behaviors of natives is a productive avenue for future research.

GENERAL EQUILIBRIUM AND POLITICAL ECONOMY EFFECTS

Some of the most credible evaluations of integration policies come from randomized controlled trials or designs like RD, which estimate treatment effects for a small number of individuals and for a limited time horizon. When implemented at scale or over longer time horizons, the same policies may trigger broader changes in the economy and society, changing the initially produced estimates of policy effects. So far, few studies consider such general equilibrium effects of policies targeting immigrants, even though large interventions such as amnesty programs are likely to affect wages and other aggregate quantities, feeding back into the outcomes of immigrant groups that already have access to the labor market. An exception is the study by Elias et al. (2022), who develop a structural model of the labor market to estimate the effects of an unexpected legalization program implemented in Spain in 2004. They find positive effects of legalization on newly documented immigrants and no effects on the formal employment of natives.

Large policy changes may also have political economy effects. Policy changes induce political responses from various actors, which can change both the effects of the policy and the trajectory of integration. Correlational evidence suggests that exclusionary policies may trigger immigrant

mobilization (Pantoja et al. 2001) or, conversely, reduce political involvement of immigrant groups (Schildkraut 2005), affecting future policies and integration outcomes. Future research should examine when and how current policy may affect the dynamics of future policies and integration outcomes through political responses of immigrants and natives.

MULTIPLE PATHWAYS

Most policies are complex packages that affect integration simultaneously through their effects on more than one actor and via more than one pathway. As examples, I discuss one policy type that works through multiple material channels and is likely to have general equilibrium effects (settlement), one in which symbolic channels for both immigrants and natives play as strong a role as material ones (cultural rights), and one in which compensatory responses by nontargeted immigrants may produce unintended consequences (bilingual education).

Settlement

Settlement policies most frequently target newly arrived asylum seekers who, to qualify for specific benefits, are allocated to administrative units according to different rules, either randomly or based on criteria such as population. Most of the literature has focused on two factors underlying the effect of settlement policies: the size of immigrants' coethnic network and the characteristics of the location of assignment.

Large coethnic networks may facilitate integration by providing information to new arrivals about labor market opportunities, administrative processes, and bureaucratic procedures, as well as local social norms. At the same time, coethnic enclaves lower the rate of interactions with the majority, possibly delaying social integration. Broadly, then, enclave size affects the costs of integration through information provision but also influences the barriers set for participation in society and the labor market, with ambiguous effects. Easier labor market integration through coethnic professional networks can be positive for immigrants' outcomes but also lower the effort required of immigrants to connect to natives and apply for higher-quality jobs, possibly lowering occupational standing and wages.

A seminal paper by Edin et al. (2003) studied the effects of enclaves by exploiting the Swedish dispersal policy that allocated asylum seekers to municipalities based on their observable characteristics. Their findings indicated that negative effects of enclaves estimated by noncausal designs were contaminated by sorting, as immigrants who select into enclaves have worse labor market outcomes. Accounting for this channel, the effects of enclaves on earnings were found to be positive, more concentrated among less educated immigrants, and increasing in the quality of the enclave, measured as the average labor income and self-employment of the ethnic group. These findings were later confirmed by studies taking advantage of similar dispersion policies in other European countries (see **Supplemental Table 1**).

Besides enclave size, the characteristics of the assignment location matter a great deal for immigrant outcomes. Immigrant costs of effort and the exclusionary role of barriers are decreasing in the overall quality of the labor market and that of the coethnic network in assignment locations. Studies find that refugees' employment depends on unemployment rates in the municipality of assignment and that immigrant outcomes in multiple domains (employment, earnings, educational performance, political participation) depend positively on those of their coethnics (see **Supplemental Table 1** for relevant studies).

One implication of these conclusions is that dispersal policies that randomly allocate immigrants to locations result in worse integration outcomes than targeted policies that account for location characteristics (Edin et al. 2004, Fasani et al. 2022). Recently, scholars have realized that

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the effects of settlement policies depend on the match between immigrants and locations. Most notably, Bansak et al. (2018) use an algorithmic assignment of refugees to locations based on historical characteristics of both sides of the match and show that resettlement based on this procedure improves employment probabilities of refugees both on average and in almost all locations.

In sum, the literature on settlement policies consistently indicates that large enclaves are not necessarily an impediment to refugees' integration after accounting for negative selection, and that targeted placement, especially if aimed at the match between immigrants and locations, can be a significant improvement over random allocation. However, given that the bulk of the literature has focused on employment and earnings, evidence on how settlement affects the social and political integration of refugees remains limited. Additionally, neither causal inference nor machine learning approaches have yet accounted for the general equilibrium effects of settlement policies, which may be large, especially if large numbers of refugees are allocated across space. Refugee settlement may affect local labor markets and trigger internal migration movements. Our understanding of such processes requires a more principled way of considering the interconnectedness of settlement with other labor market and social dynamics.

Cultural Rights

Much of the public and academic debate on integration policies has centered on the relative effectiveness of multiculturalism, understood as the recognition and active protection of differentiated rights for minority groups (Wright & Bloemraad 2012, Koopmans 2013). Early empirical evidence on the effects of multicultural policies, mainly based on cross-country comparisons or using policy indices, has been inconclusive (Koopmans 2013, Bloemraad & Wright 2014, Goodman 2015). Studies found lower socioeconomic integration of immigrants in countries with higher protections for cultural group rights (Koopmans 2010, Ersanilli & Koopmans 2011) and mixed results on immigrants' support for religious symbols and religious education (Carol et al. 2015).

Such mixed findings are likely not only due to lack of causal identification but also a result of the theoretical ambiguity of multicultural policies. Materially, religious and cultural accommodations for immigrant groups lower the barrier for full participation in the host society. On the one hand, this mechanically allows for more participation. Requirements to abandon public expressions of one's religion in order to become fully accepted as an equal society member impose significant psychological costs on immigrants, particularly those with stronger religious convictions or more traditional values, which often correlate with other indicators of socioeconomic status. Immigrants unwilling or unable to bear such costs may avoid situations that require them, retreating into their own communities. On the other hand, guaranteed preservation of cultural difference creates cultural enclaves and reduces incentives for interactions outside them for language acquisition or the formation of social ties with majorities. Ultimately, the effect of multiculturalism depends on how high or low the bar is set relative to immigrants' costs of integration effort.

Besides their purely material effects, cultural accommodations have an even stronger symbolic effect than other types of policies. They are also likely to affect the behavior of host society members, either by signaling a society's commitment to inclusion or by triggering anti-immigrant backlash. A cross-country panel analysis showed that religious accommodations increased religiosity among both Muslims and Christians in Europe (Kwon & McCaffree 2021). This finding is interpreted as a threat response and points to the possibility that multiculturalism hardens boundaries through native backlash.

Few studies estimate the causal effects of specific cultural policies. Slotwinski & Stutzer (2019) find that immigrants move out of Swiss municipalities that show high support for a ban on minarets. The effect is likely to work through psychological channels, as bans signal exclusion and may trigger avoidance responses on the part of immigrants. Abdelgadir & Fouka (2020) study

the effects of a 2004 headscarf ban in French public schools. Comparing female students from different parental origins across cohorts, they find that exposure to the ban at school reduced the educational attainment of Muslim girls and document increased perceptions of discrimination as a likely psychological channel that interfered with adolescent students' school performance. Theoretically, prohibitions on the headscarf may deprive Muslim women of a means to signal religious commitment to their families and communities, a device that allows them to participate in education and the labor market (Carvalho 2013). Indeed, religious accommodations in other secular contexts have been shown to improve education and labor market outcomes of religious women (e.g., Corekcioglu 2021). More work is needed to fully understand the effects of cultural bans and accommodations on immigrant integration, particularly as these policies may have effects that are nonmonotonic in the permissiveness of accommodations (with accommodations facilitating integration, up to a point), heterogeneous depending on immigrants' backgrounds and religiosity, and working through both material and symbolic pathways as well as through the reactions of the host population.

Bilingual Education

Bilingual education also falls under the broad umbrella of multicultural policies. Here, the trade-off inherent in multiculturalism is evident: Allowing immigrant students to use their native language in school facilitates the transition to a new language environment and may have positive effects on their school performance, educational attainment, and overall integration in adult life. These positive effects should be stronger for students from less privileged backgrounds or of higher linguistic distance, who would have found it harder to perform well in a monolingual setting. At the same time, bilingual environments lower the incentives to learn the host country language.

Additionally, besides being a means of communication, language has a symbolic dimension as a component of culture and identity. Monolingual education, as well as other policies regulating the cultural content of schooling, may trigger compensatory responses by parents who care about passing on their culture to their children (Bisin & Verdier 2001). Such considerations may affect decisions of parents to enroll their children in minority schools, or to strengthen cultural investment in the family or community. The effect of such policies on social and cultural integration is thus ambiguous. Qualitative evidence indicates that parents indeed worry about the cultural influence of education on their children, even in contexts where the economic incentives for integration are strong. For instance, Syrian refugees in Turkey express concerns about the effects that secular education might have on their children, including losing knowledge of Arabic as a marker of identity (Unutulmaz 2019).

Empirically, causal studies on the effects of bilingual education have all focused on the United States and reveal either null (Chin et al. 2013) or small and transient (Slavin et al. 2011) negative effects of bilingualism on school performance. In terms of identity, monolingual policies may trigger a backlash, especially when enacted in a hostile climate that signals exclusion. Evaluating the effect of foreign language bans in the early-twentieth-century United States, Fouka (2020) finds that forced monolingualism reduced identification with the country among targeted immigrant groups and documents parental compensatory responses as a likely mechanism.

CONCLUSIONS

Public policy affects the equilibrium of immigrant integration by changing the behavior of immigrants and natives and their interactions. I have summarized recent empirical work on policy effects by considering some of the channels, material and psychological, through which policy

FOUR CONCLUSIONS

1. Policies that lower immigrant costs of effort can be an effective tool for integration.
2. Policies that incentivize immigrant behaviors by withholding resources or restricting access to legal status are an ambiguous policy tool that can even hinder integration, particularly for more marginalized groups.
3. Policies have heterogeneous effects depending on immigrants' backgrounds, resources, and costs of effort.
4. Policy effects are hard to predict because they act through both material and symbolic effects, which may counteract each other, and can trigger unintended responses from both immigrants and native-born citizens.

affects the perceptions and choices of involved actors and the resulting equilibrium. While not exhaustive, the channels considered serve to synthesize results for policy types on which there is sufficient empirical research. This synthesis yields four main takeaways (see the sidebar titled Four Conclusions).

Policies that lower immigrant costs of effort can be an effective tool for integration. If integration is the goal of the policymaker, policies that reduce the cost of immigrant actions for engagement and participation in the host society emerge as the most reliable policy tool. The empirical literature yields consistently positive estimates of the effects of cost-reducing interventions such as language courses or targeted educational programs. However, even cost-reducing policies may be ineffective if the bottleneck for integration lies not in the actions of immigrants but in barriers erected by the host society, such as prejudiced attitudes of natives.⁵

Policies that incentivize immigrant behaviors by withholding resources or restricting access to legal status are an ambiguous policy tool that can even hinder integration, particularly for more marginalized groups. Limiting the generosity of welfare or setting high requirements for access to legal status may incentivize certain actions conducive to integration (e.g., job searches or language learning), but it increases deprivation and discourages efforts among immigrants who find the bar set too high. Studies show that strict requirements for legal status tend to hurt immigrants with fewer resources, such as more limited labor market experience. On the flip side, access to citizenship has more positive effects for more marginalized immigrant groups.

Policies have heterogeneous effects depending on immigrants' backgrounds, resources, and costs of effort. Heterogeneity in the effects of policy is one of the most consistent findings emerging from the literature. Evaluating the heterogeneous effects of policy is not straightforward, given that policy acts through multiple channels. For instance, a reduction in barriers to access may be more beneficial for immigrant groups of lower resources or higher linguistic distance; at the same time, those with more education or skills, or those most culturally similar, may be more able to take advantage of easier access in order to integrate. Further complicating the picture, heterogeneous effects estimated by most studies cannot be interpreted causally, as immigrant characteristics used to define subgroups are correlated with other observable and unobservable attributes. Paying more attention to causality and a theoretically driven interpretation of heterogeneity is important for answering normative questions. Who gains or loses from specific policies? Should a policy

⁵For policymakers, cost-effectiveness—in the sense of minimizing (taxpayers') costs of policy implementation relative to returns in terms of immigrant integration—may be an even more important consideration than effectiveness alone. Language courses and job training programs may be expensive to implement. However, more cost-effective alternatives, such as settlement policies implemented before arrival (Bansak et al. 2018), also likely work through similar theoretical channels. Optimized matches reduce immigrants' costs of adjustment to a particular cultural environment or labor market.

be adopted if it improves integration on average but hurts or excludes the most marginalized immigrant groups?

Policy effects are hard to predict, because they act through both material and symbolic effects, which may counteract each other, and can trigger unintended responses from both immigrants and native-born citizens. A policymaker should consider the totality of channels through which a policy affects integration, including its impact on multiple actors through both material and symbolic channels. The literature suggests that incentivizing or facilitating changes in the behavior of immigrants may not affect outcomes if barriers to integration come primarily from the host society (e.g., Vernby & Dancygier 2019); that the symbolic and material effects of a policy may move in opposite directions (e.g., Hilbig & Riaz 2022); and that policies aimed at improving inclusion can backfire, due to unintended responses of both immigrants (e.g., Dahl et al. 2022) and natives (e.g., Williamson 2018).

This review does not assume that integration is the main objective of the policymaker. While some governments adopt integration policies in order to facilitate immigrant incorporation, others may use such policies to circumscribe immigrants' domain in the country's life, to signal a country's values, or even to discourage immigrants from moving in (Goodman 2011). Varying policy intentions do not confound causal estimates of policy effects. However, accounting for policy drivers is informative of the context in which a policy is adopted—and thus of theoretically relevant quantities such as exclusionary intentions, native attitudes, or immigrant characteristics—and can therefore be helpful for interpreting the sign and magnitude of effects and aggregating causal estimates across contexts.

In concluding this review, I highlight four areas for future research. First, while the bulk of the literature has focused on evaluating policy effects on immigrant behavior and outcomes, only a few studies have examined the responses of natives, and hardly any work has focused on immigrant–native interactions in response to policy change. Do natives change their behavior toward immigrants depending on their legal status, participation in government programs, or assigned location of settlement? Do changes in integration policy, such as emphasis on cost reduction versus incentive provision, change whether natives perceive integration as relying more on immigrants than on the host society, and consequently their behavior toward immigrants? Under which conditions do inclusive policies increase native tolerance and under which conditions do they trigger a backlash that undoes any positive effects on integration?

Second, more and better causal studies are needed to test the validity of past correlational analyses and to illuminate policy domains and ranges of outcomes for which evidence remains limited. The move toward causally identified studies has propelled the literature forward by generating internally valid estimates of policy effects and avoiding pitfalls plaguing earlier studies, such as selection of immigrants into policies and the concern that policies are adopted precisely in response to immigrants' current or expected integration. Causal identification has sometimes generated opposite conclusions from those of correlational studies, as in the cases of studies evaluating the effects of welfare generosity or settlement policies. Yet, credible estimates of policy effects are more abundant for policies relating to the labor market and outcomes measuring economic integration. In other policy domains (such as civic integration or access to cultural rights) and types of outcomes (such as social or psychological integration), the literature is dominated by correlational evidence. Additionally, the few studies focused on these domains that employ methods for causal identification (e.g., difference-in-differences) do not carefully verify the assumptions on which these designs rest (e.g., parallel trends), or are performed in settings where the assumptions are likely to be violated (e.g., cross-country analyses).

A third challenge for research is to address external validity by making progress in understanding why particular policy effects are found in particular cases. Replication of studies across contexts

is a crucial component of this effort but not the only one. Credible designs yield positive effects of policy in some cases and null or negative effects in others (see, e.g., Hainmueller et al. 2017a, 2023). There are many possible explanations for such a discrepancy, and arbitrating among them necessitates theory. Theoretical models of integration that explicitly incorporate causal mechanisms for policy effects need not be formal, but formalization entails abstraction that increases portability across contexts and makes quantitative testing and revision of theories easier. A promising avenue for future research is to ground theories in the micro foundations of human behavior, considering both immigrants and natives as purposeful decision makers in their respective social contexts and building on insights from psychology and behavioral economics. Ultimately, a well-articulated theory of behavior is an essential foundation for any research on the effects of policies and institutions (North 2019). Such a theoretical foundation can provide guidance for replications—by illuminating which contextual differences may matter for estimated effects—and for the design of targeted empirical tests of specific mechanisms.

Finally, the theory we develop and test should account not only for relevant choices and constraints but also for interactions across actors, general equilibrium, and political economy effects. Micro-level inferences from causal policy evaluations may illuminate a single pathway, but aggregate effects work through multiple interacting channels. The challenge at hand is to connect evidence from multiple well-identified studies into a systematic and coherent framework. The problem resembles one faced by other fields, such as the political economy of development, that have made use of advances in applied econometrics to generate credible estimates of policy interventions (Wilke & Humphreys 2020). One way forward, though certainly not the only one, is to complement causal analyses with more “structural” approaches, which estimate parameters relying on an underlying model. Such an approach would allow researchers not only to generate counterfactuals (e.g., what would be the effects of a policy if implemented in different country contexts or on different groups of immigrants?) but also to make welfare statements about the effects of particular institutional designs (see Acharya et al. 2022 for an example). While moving in that direction is challenging, particularly when policies have complex social effects that do not neatly fit into generally accepted models of political economy or markets, the returns in terms of knowledge generation are potentially high.

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