

How Open Borders Will Win, If It Wins

Bryan Caplan
Dep't of Economics
George Mason University
Mercatus Center
EconLog

The Promise of Open Borders

- Open borders presents an historic opportunity to:
 - Dramatically increase global production.
 - End absolute poverty for all mankind.
 - Create a low-cost escape route from political and cultural oppression.
- The modest mechanism: deregulation of international labor and housing markets, ending *mandatory* discrimination against foreigners.
- Competing mechanisms are much less effective, with ample collateral damage:
 - Redistribution
 - Diplomacy
 - Military action

The Myth of the Rational Voter

- If open borders is so great, why hasn't it happened already?
- If you think democracy gravitates strongly to good policies, this is a big puzzle.
- Contrarily, my *The Myth of the Rational Voter* argues bad policies routinely win by popular demand because:
 - Some views – such as “anti-foreign bias” – are emotionally appealing.
 - Selfish cost of political irrationality is near-0.
- Upshot: We should expect open borders to be unpopular even if the arguments are great.

Overcoming Unpopularity

- The half-full glass: Many good but unpopular ideas eventually win.
- Key: Target *relatively* receptive, politically influential audiences.
 - This can snowball via “social proof.”
 - Good evidence that democracies are much more responsive to elite opinion. (e.g. Gilens)

Open Borders @Harvard

- Good news: Harvard students match the desired profile:
 - Young, hence *relatively* persuadable.
 - Elite, and likely to stay that way.
 - Relatively cosmopolitan.
 - Relatively open to economic and philosophical arguments.
- Same goes for young, academic elites in general.

Winning for Open Borders

- Step 1: Convert the elite.
- Step 2: Intellectual trickle-down.
- Step 3: Disproportionate political response.
- Feedback loops:
 - The upside of status quo bias.
 - Shock doctrine.
- Consolation prize: 90% failure still does great good.