

Migration and Trade: Political Substitutes? Evidence from US Congressional Roll Call Votes

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Abstract (short)

We analyze the determinants of the voting behavior of US elected representatives on migration and trade policy issues for legislation introduced between the early 1970s and 2006. To this end, we have collected an exhaustive dataset on roll call votes from the US House of Representatives and combined it with information on the economic characteristic of the electoral constituencies, as well as on the legislators' ideological orientation. Our analysis suggests that both economic and non-economic drivers play an important role in explaining US elected representatives voting behavior. Economic evidence is broadly consistent with a factor endowment model. In other words, representatives from import-competing districts tend to be more likely to oppose both trade liberalization bills and measures that increase the availability of unskilled labor supply. Non economic drivers appear to play a more important role in explaining voting behavior towards migration rather than towards trade.

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Abstract (long)

We analyze the determinants of the voting behavior of US elected representatives on migration and trade policy issues for legislation introduced between the early 1970s and 2006. To this end, we have collected an exhaustive dataset on roll call votes from the US House of Representatives between the early 1970s and 2006. Roll call votes are recorded votes that enable to observe individual voting behavior of House representatives on single bills and amendments. Concerning migration we focused on final passage votes with a potential impact on US labor supply. By doing so, we are able to consider all substantial changes in immigration legislation introduced in the period, like for instance the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986. The composition of the majority which has supported the various bills we have considered is very heterogeneous and reflects the controversial nature of immigration policy in the US. Concerning trade we collected voting decisions of US representatives on important trade policy reforms.

In the second step we combined our roll call data with information on the economic and non-economic characteristics of the electoral constituencies, as well as on the legislators' ideological orientation. Our dependent variable is the representative's vote on immigration bills and FTA. It is coded as 1 if the legislator votes in favor of more open immigration and respectively trade policies and 0 otherwise. The main economic regressor of interest is the trade exposure of a congressional district, which is defined as the ratio of workers in export relative to import-competing industries. The trade exposure variable at the Congressional district level has been constructed with data of the County Business pattern (CBS). Other economic controls are unemployment, the share of blue-collar workers and the share of unionized workers. As non-economic controls we included amongst others the share of foreign born and the share of Afro-Americans. Both reflect the ethnic composition of a district. Our results suggest that districts with a large foreign born population will tend to support open immigration policies due to social and family networks. On the other hand we find evidence suggesting that districts with large Afro-Americans population tend to see their representatives voting in favor of immigration restrictions. This result is consistent with recent empirical evidence for the US labor market suggesting that native blacks and immigrants often compete for similar jobs. Finally, we capture the ideological orientation of a representative by looking at his/her party affiliation and the conservative rating index. The latter is provided by the American Conservative Union (ACU), which rates every

congressman on a scale from 0 to 100, with higher scores assigned to more conservative politicians.

Our analysis suggests that both economic and non-economic drivers play an important role in explaining US elected representatives voting behavior. Economic evidence is broadly consistent with a factor endowment model. The likelihood of a representative to vote in favor of trade liberalization and liberalizing immigration legislation increases with the degree of trade exposure of his/her district. In other words, representatives from import-competing districts tend to be more likely to oppose both trade liberalization bills and measures that increase the availability of unskilled labor supply via immigration legislation. Non economic drivers appear to play a more important role in explaining voting behavior towards migration rather than towards trade.