Myths about chain migration

David Bier

February 25, 2018

President Donald Trump has said an end to "chain migration" is one of the must-have elements of any immigration deal in Congress. Many analysts believe this demand could impede an agreement. But if we are to debate the right policy on chain migration, we should first understand what the debate is about.

Various myths about the concept are muddling the already contentious conversation. Among them:

1."Chain migration" is an offensive term for "family reunification"

Sen. Chris Murphy (D-Conn.) is among those who consider the mere phrase offensive, tweeting that it is "a made up term by the hard-line anti-immigration crowd" whose "purpose is to dehumanize immigrants." In fact, it was academics John and Leatrice MacDonald who popularized the term in the early 1960s to describe immigrants who follow earlier immigrants, just as links follow one another in a chain. In any case, explaining relationships with metaphors is not dehumanizing. No one sees "stepchild" as an epithet.

Some liberal groups insist that "family reunification" is the only proper term. But the chain metaphor is more descriptive, referring to a specific type of family reunification: when the family member is following another immigrant. A foreigner who marries someone born in the United States and comes to live with them here, sometimes after waiting months or even a year while their application is pending, is "reuniting" with family, but they are not part of a "chain."

Trump confuses the issue further by using "chain" to refer to all family-sponsored immigrants except spouses and minor children of citizens or legal residents. Yet many U.S. citizens with foreign-born spouses are themselves immigrants who received citizenship through naturalization, and all foreign-born spouses and minor children of permanent residents are chain migrants. On the flip side, he labels all parents, siblings and adult children of citizens as "chain migrants," even though many of the citizens were born here.

2.Chain migration is a liberal policy

Conservative commentator Ann Coulter claims the 1965 law that created America's chain migration system was, as one interviewer summarized, "expressly designed to change the demographics of our country--to be poorer and more inclined to vote Democrat." But the flow from Europe had already dropped from nearly two-thirds of all legal immigration to just one-third between 1946 and 1965, and it was conservatives who pushed for the family-sponsored system, believing it would reverse the trend.

House immigration subcommittee Chairman Michael Feighan, a conservative Democrat from Ohio, refused to hold hearings on the initial bill in 1965 because it emphasized employer-sponsored immigration. He guided the final package to focus on an expansive family-sponsored system. Because at the time European immigrants remained three-quarters of America's foreign-born residents, conservatives like those at the American Legion expected that "the great bulk of immigration henceforth will not merely hail from the same parent countries as our present citizens, but will be their close relatives."

This prediction turned out to be incorrect. The pre-1965 trend continued unabated, and by 1985 just one legal immigrant in 10 arrived from Europe. As Europeans became wealthier, fewer wanted to relocate, while other nationalities continued to find ways into the family-sponsored system, first through marriage and later through other relations.

Nonetheless, the conservatives' theory has merit: Chain migration does act as a conservative force, maintaining the status quo longer than would selecting immigrants solely on market or humanitarian factors. Without chains, European immigration may have died out even faster than it did.

3.One immigrant can bring in many far-flung family members in just a few years

In his State of the Union address Trump claimed, "Under the current broken system, a single immigrant can bring in virtually unlimited numbers of distant relatives." In reality America's immigration laws strictly limit the types and numbers of family-sponsored immigrants. The laws allow U.S. citizens and legal residents to sponsor only immigrants who are their immediate relatives--spouses, children, siblings and parents--and the spouses and minor children of those immigrants.

Even these categories are strictly controlled. Only parents, spouses and young children of U.S. citizens can enter without a numerical limit. The law places caps on adult children and siblings of U.S. citizens, as well as spouses and all children of legal residents. The law also prevents any single country from using more than 7 percent of the quota in a given category. In combination, these restrictions can result in significant wait times for certain nationalities. Mexican and Filipino siblings and adult children of U.S. citizens, for example, typically wait more than two decades to immigrate to America.

4.Chain immigrants are security and terrorist threats

House Judiciary Committee Chairman Bob Goodlatte (R-Va.) argues that restricting family reunification would "make us safer," citing a failed terrorist attack in New York in which an immigrant who had come to the United States on a family visa detonated a bomb on his chest, injuring only himself. Yet from 1975 through 2017, the likelihood of a U.S. resident or citizen being murdered by any person who entered the United States as a legal permanent resident--not someone who entered on a temporary visa--was just 1 in 1.2 billion per year. Regular murderers were 80,000 times more likely to kill Americans than legal immigrant terrorists.

Legal immigrants to the United States--more than 70 percent of whom are sponsored by a U.S. family member --are also far less likely to commit crimes generally. Based on Census Bureau data, U.S.-born adults are three times more likely to be incarcerated than legal immigrants of the same age group. By lowering the crime rate, law-abiding residents make America safer.

5.Chain immigrants lack skills to succeed

In making his case for the president's proposals recently, Attorney General Jeff Sessions said, "What good does it do to bring in somebody who is illiterate in their own country, has no skills and is going to struggle in our country and not be successful?" This description distorts the picture of immigrants who settle in the United States.

Nearly half of adults in the family-sponsored and diversity visa categories had a college degree, compared with less than a third of U.S. natives. America would lose nearly a quarter-million college graduates every year without the family-sponsored and diversity programs.

Even among the 11 percent who have little formal education, there is no evidence that they aren't successful. By virtually every measure, the least-skilled immigrants prosper in America. Immigrant men without high school degrees are almost as likely as U.S.-born men with college degrees to look for a job and keep one.

Family-sponsored immigrants are the most upwardly mobile American workers. Whether high-skilled or not, chain or not, immigrants succeed in and contribute to this country.

David Bier is an immigration policy analyst at the Cato Institute.