

Wealthy democracies have looser immigration policies, researchers find

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Does rising inequality lead to more-restrictive or less-restrictive immigration policies?

The answer is "both," according to University of Colorado Boulder Assistant Professor of Political Science Adrian Shin, who makes that case in a recently published essay "Inequality and Immigration Policy" with UCLA Associate Professor of Political Science Margaret Peters. The pair found that rising [inequality](#) leads to stricter immigration policies in lower-income countries, whereas the opposite occurs in higher-income countries.

Shin studies international political economy and focuses on migration. But he also has an interest in inequality, and for some time has been looking to bridge the two areas.

"There are a lot of experts who study these topics, but the connection isn't always clear," he says.

"Inequality and Immigration Policy," published online by *Studies in Comparative International Development* in September, is Shin's "stepping-stone from the migration research to the inequality research."

Shin defines inequality in economic and industrial terms.

When a product is made, he explains, its value increases with each stage of production. That increase is called "value added." Some of the value added belongs to factory owners, otherwise known as capital, and some of it belongs to workers, otherwise known as labor.

The gap dividing capital's share of value added from labor's share is inequality, Shin explains. And when that gap widens—when capital's share far outweighs labor's, for instance—inequality can be said to be rising.

After analyzing data on 24 [democratic countries](#) from 1947 to 2006, Shin and Peters found that rising inequality is linked with both stricter

and more lenient immigration policies.

"What's the determining factor?" Shin asks rhetorically. "The country's economic development."

In low-income economies, Shin says, rising inequality leads to more restrictive immigration policies, whereas in high-income economies it does the opposite.

Key to understanding why is the idea of competition, Shin argues. Local workers in low-income economies compete with migrant workers for the same jobs and consequently develop anti-immigration attitudes, which then prompt stricter immigration laws.

On the other hand, local workers in high-income economies don't compete with [migrant workers](#) for the same jobs. Anti-immigration attitudes therefore wane, and labor-intensive firms end up using their wealth and power to push for more relaxed immigration policies, given that more migrants means more workers.

Shin suggests that this research can help to reveal what makes a democratic country's immigration policies tick.

"Immigration policy variation is a puzzle," he says. "Sometimes it looks like policymakers are introducing restrictions out of nowhere, but a lot of these explanatory variables are already in the current of politics."

Things get a bit tricky, however, when studying countries with complicated political systems, such as the United States.

"It's easier to analyze European countries, in a way, because they sometimes have just one electoral district, as in the case of the Netherlands," Shin says.

"When it comes to countries like the U.S., although inequality might influence [immigration policy](#), ultimately what really decides policy outcomes is how these interests and forces are translated through very peculiar political institutions."

In the future, Shin plans to study how racial or ethnic inequality shapes immigration policy. "Specifically, does increasing ethnic inequality lead to changes in immigration or emigration policies?"

Shin intends to focus that research on the Global South, which denotes generally poorer regions within Latin America, Asia, Africa and Oceania. Yet doing so, he notes, will pose some challenges.

"When it comes to the Global South, it is hard to collect data on immigration policies and to know what to make of the data because they are often not enforced by governments. Obtaining [reliable data](#) on immigration policies that have actual [policy](#) ramifications is likely to be difficult," he says.

Difficult or not, Shin, who also teaches a class on political survival in the show "Game of Thrones," is ready. It's hard to faze someone who's sat on the Iron Throne.

"Welcome to academic research," he says.

More information: Margaret E. Peters et al, Inequality and Immigration Policy, *Studies in Comparative International Development* (2022). [DOI: 10.1007/s12116-022-09372-x](https://doi.org/10.1007/s12116-022-09372-x)

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