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Spain's immigration fix

By Amanda Taub

Few topics are more politically charged than immigration. Although many countries face shrinking work forces, accepting large numbers of immigrants risks voter backlash and political instability.

The result: Many wealthy countries are working to keep immigrants out, even as [central bankers](#) and [economists](#) urge more immigration to supplement the labor supply and increase tax revenues.

That's a seemingly intractable dilemma. But Spain, which has one of the lowest birthrates in Europe and a shrinking native-born work force, may have found a way through that impasse.

Last month, its center-left government said it would give hundreds of thousands of undocumented migrants [a path to obtain legal status](#).

"Migration is the only way forward," Borja Suárez Corujo, Spain's secretary of state for social security and pensions, said in an interview. "If we want our society to maintain and to make progress, we do need people for that."

The center-right Popular Party, however, said the policy would overwhelm public services. A spokeswoman for Vox, Spain's far-right party, said it "attacks our identity."

Changing policy could still be a gamble in a country where Vox's support in the polls has risen from zero to nearly 20 percent in the last decade.

But Spain's government has drawn on a broad societal coalition, including many business leaders and the Roman Catholic Church, to enact a policy that has become politically unthinkable in the United States and many other rich countries.

Avoiding triggers

Spain has long allowed undocumented immigrants to gain legal status within a few years of arriving if they could prove they had roots in the community via employment, family or social ties. Citizens of many Latin American countries have been able to travel to Spain on visa waivers or tourist visas, and then stay.

Since 2019, nearly 40 percent of all new jobs in Spain have been filled by immigrants, according to government statistics.

“We came to Spain to work, not to ask for handouts or depend on anyone,” said Marita González, 35, who arrived from Peru as a tourist with her two daughters and stayed. “We need to work, and for that we need papers.” Today, she earns 750 euros a month caring for two older adults. Spain’s relatively liberal immigration policy, including the recent amnesty, avoids some of the biggest triggers for anti-immigrant sentiment.

Data from More in Common, a political research group studying polarization in the U.S. and Europe, suggests that public support for immigration is often predicated on two things: People must believe that immigration is under control and that immigrants are contributing to the economy and national interests.

The government and pro-immigration campaigners have framed the new amnesty as a “pro-law” measure that will bring more immigrants into the formal economy, where they will pay taxes and be subject to legal obligations.

The perception of control

The data from More in Common shows that when people feel that their borders are not secure, support for immigration falls. In the U.S., the perception that President Biden lost control over the southern border fueled hostility toward immigration, said Tim Dixon, the group’s C.E.O.

The way that undocumented migrants enter a country matters a lot for public opinion. The vast U.S.-Mexico border can create fears of uncontrollable immigration when crossings surge.

Unlike the U.S., Spain has relatively low numbers of asylum seekers who cross land or sea borders without authorization. Undocumented migrants tend to arrive legally as tourists on visa waivers, and then overstay. That avoids provoking the sense that the borders are uncontrolled, because the government could close that pathway at any time.

Activists say that, while Spain is an outlier on a continent closing its doors, its warm welcome doesn’t extend to many Africans. It finances, equips and trains Morocco and other countries to [stop migrants before they reach Europe](#) via the Canary Islands, and has heavily fortified crossings in Ceuta and Melilla, two Spanish cities in North Africa.

Could it work elsewhere?

Spain has some unique attributes, particularly its large pool of potential immigrants in Latin America who share its language and religious heritage. But its framing of the immigration debate around the public's need for order suggests a template that could travel widely.

One big lesson: If people feel confident that the government has its borders under control, they will often accept high levels of immigration. "When they feel that control has been restored, then they normalize," Dixon said.

Australia set up offshore detention centers for asylum seekers, provoking criticism from other countries. But once the public became convinced the government was in control of its borders, sentiment shifted, Dixon said. Today, more than 30 percent of the Australian population was born overseas.

Given its connection to Latin America, Spain has an advantage that is difficult to replicate. But Dixon believes its strategy — demonstrating control over borders while making the economic case for immigration — may offer a solution to a knotty problem that is shared by nearly every wealthy nation.