

Communications



Estimating the propensity of guestworkers to leave

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How likely are “guestworkers” to return to their homelands? And can one influence their rate of return through non-coercive policy measures?

A supply versus demand controversy rages as far as the determinants of contemporary international economic migration are concerned. In an earlier study, I examined this question analytically as well as empirically.¹ Results of the study indicate that the supply of labor coming from abroad is necessary but insufficient for international labor movements to occur. The sufficient condition lies in the demand originating from the migrant-receiving country. This demand is caused economically, screened politically, and given effect administratively. Some countries declare publicly that they wish to admit certain numbers or types of foreign workers; in others, the politics and administration produce illegal aliens.

The following discussion examines the propensity of migrant workers to return to their countries of origin and the effectiveness of non-coercive policy tools aimed at controlling foreign labor flows, with special focus on the West German experience.

Guestworker policies explained

As they have evolved in Western Europe, guestworker policies are neither temporary worker programs nor inspired by the immigration-and-settlement philosophy. They fall—rather uncomfortably—between two stools. Foreigners are invited to stay in the hope that they will leave. But the administrative apparatus does not, as a rule, force them to return on economic grounds.²

In the United States, Western European guestworker policies have been perceived as temporary worker programs involving nonimmigrants. This is incorrect. If

temporary means what it says—only for a time—the temporary admission of foreigners stands for limited-time programs and implies voluntary exit or enforced departure when the time is up. Seasonal workers in France and Switzerland fall into this category as do workers under the H-2 program in the United States, but the bulk of Western Europe’s migrant workers—those ordinarily considered in this context—do not.

The nature of guestworker policy may be illustrated by an important policy statement from Western Europe’s archtypical guestworker country, West Germany: “The Federal Government continues to proceed from the assumption that the overwhelming number of foreign employees will not stay in the Federal Republic . . . The limitation of the duration of stay will not be effected through (police) measures under the law relating to foreigners.”³

A guestworker policy controls the *inflow* of foreigners, not their stock or return flow. The numbers present or returning are expected to be regulated by the interplay of market forces, and the short-run targets or return orientation attributed to migrants. Empirical tests confirm this. For example, 96 percent of the changes in admission of workers in West Germany during 1961–76 can be explained by variations in unfilled vacancies in the Federal Republic. On the other hand, the demand for labor and the stock of foreign workers or the numbers returning correlate very badly or not at all.⁴

Temporariness measured and explained

What proportion of the guests admitted for the purpose of employment later return home? Can one identify policy variables that would explain differential rates of return?

Calculations for the Federal Republic of Germany show that about 9 in 10 Italian, 8 in 10 Spanish, 7 in 10 Greek, 5 in 10 Yugoslav, and 3 in 10 of the Turkish workers who were admitted to work during the years 1961–76 left again during this period. Other nationalities averaged a combined return rate of 66 percent and the overall rate for Germany was 68 percent. In the case of Switzerland it amounted to 83 percent for the same years and can apparently be explained as a composite of the German rates for the major nationalities weighted according to their size in the Swiss foreign labor force.⁵

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Table 1. Predicting migrants' propensity to return with their intentions, West Germany

Ranking by nationality	Propensity to return, 1961-76 (1=highest)	Proportion with short-term intentions at beginning, 1976 survey (1=highest)	Proportion in 1976 with future intentions which were:		Proportion of target workers, 1976 survey (1=highest)
			short (1=highest)	long (1=lowest)	
Italians	1	5	3	5	4
Spaniards	2	1	2	4	5
Greeks	3	2	1	1	3
Yugoslavs	4	4	4	3	1
Turks	5	3	5	2	2

SOURCES: "Propensity to return" rankings are from W. R. Böning, "Guest Worker Employment, with Special Reference to the Federal Republic of Germany, France, and Switzerland - Lessons for the United States?" Working paper NB-5 (University of Maryland, Center for Philosophy and Public Policy, 1980). All other data are from Forschungsverbund, "Probleme der Ausländerbeschäftigung," in *Integrierter Endbericht* (Bundesminister für Forschung und Technologie, 1979), [Joint Research Group, "Problems of the employment of foreigners," in *Integrated Final Report* (Federal Minister for Research and Technology, 1979)], pp. 56ff and 231ff.

Migrant intentions. Western European policymakers assumed that migrants intended to return to their homes after a relatively short stay abroad. One might expect, therefore, that variations in *intentions* would predict each nationality's actual return rate. Table 1 indicates that for West Germany this is not the case.

The reasons for this are severalfold. First, individuals' intentions are complex. This is indicated, for example, by the huge proportion of people who have no clear idea regarding the duration of expatriation or who are evasive on this question. Second, short-term orientations in general and worker targets or motivations in particular are much less prevalent than assumed. "Target workers" are doubtless a minority. Third, migrants, including target workers, change their minds more often than generally thought.⁶

Moreover, intentions of individuals do not constitute a policy variable. As far as the crucial target worker is concerned, it is impossible for an administrator—or even for a sociologist or an economist—to determine reliably which candidate falls into this group. If less than 100 percent of the foreign workers do, one simply cannot anticipate what the net effect of changed intentions will be.

Family reunification. The family has, unfortunately, been considered a policy variable. Making reunification difficult was expected to motivate workers to return. At present, dependents are allowed to accompany the breadwinner in Austria, Belgium, Sweden, and the United Kingdom; the same holds true for Greeks, Portuguese, and Spaniards in France. In the case of other countries or nationalities the rule is that the breadwinner can have his nuclear family join him after a waiting period of 12-months.

Popular beliefs notwithstanding, the proportions of

inactive (dependent family members) in the migrant population tend to be quite similar in Western European countries. Marked differences have disappeared.

As table 2 demonstrates, the degree of completed family reunification in West Germany does not correlate with a nationality's tendency to return. The reasons for this must be sought in the complex web of economic, social, and human factors that make people move. It follows that, short of an inhuman policy totally prohibiting families from coming together, the manipulation of family reunification is not a promising policy variable.

Selection criteria. Host-nation choices made at the moment of recruitment, admission, or engagement are the most frequently mentioned instrument to influence return rates. Personal characteristics (such as age or marital status) and socioeconomic factors (rural versus urban origin, types of skills, previous employment experience), as well as the status and pay levels of jobs offered to candidates from nearby rather than distant countries (benefit versus cost of migration) are generally viewed as suitable predictors of differential rates of return. Data for West Germany presented in table 3 cast serious doubts on the assumptions governing selection measures. There is no coherent correlation with the measured degree of return or among the various criteria themselves. Moreover, what one determinant indicates at one time is quite different from what it indicates at another (or for another sex).⁷

Foreign aid and trade liberalization. Rich countries of employment often consider these factors a means to eliminate, in the medium term, the need for international labor movements⁸ or to stimulate return migration. One cannot directly test the efficacy of this policy variable but one can, indirectly, assess it as follows. As aid

Table 2. Predicting migrants' propensity to return by degree of completed family reunification, West Germany

Ranking by nationality	Propensity to return, 1961-76 (1=highest)	Proportion of inactive in migrant population in:		Complete families in 1976:	
		1968	1976	proportion among married workers	proportion among all migrants
		(1=lowest)		(1=lowest)	
Italians	1	4	2	4	4
Spaniards	2	5	4	3	3
Greeks	3	3	3	5	5
Yugoslavs	4	2	1	2	1
Turks	5	1	5	1	2

SOURCES: Data on "proportion of inactive" are from W. R. Böning, "Guest Worker Employment, with Special Reference to the Federal Republic of Germany, France, and Switzerland - Lessons for the United States?" Working paper NB-5 (University of Maryland, Center for Philosophy and Public Policy, 1980), p. 36. Those relating to "complete families" are from Forschungsverbund, "Probleme der Ausländerbeschäftigung," in *Integrierter Endbericht* (Bundesminister für Forschung und Technologie, 1979), [Joint Research Group, "Problems of the employment of foreigners," in *Integrated Final Report* (Federal Minister for Research and Technology, 1979)], pp. 56ff.

Table 3. Predicting migrants' propensity to return by selection criteria, West Germany

Ranking by nationality	Propensity to return, 1961-76 (1 = highest)	Personal factors:				Socioeconomic factors:				Economic factors:	
		youthfulness, 1971 data (1 = highest)	proportion of single, divorced, and widowed:		proportion of rural origin, 1971 survey (1 = highest)	proportion skilled before migration:		proportion skilled in Germany:		average net migrant income, 1976 (benefit) (1 = lowest)	distance between host and sending nation capitals (cost) (1 = shortest)
			1968	1976		1971 survey	1976 survey	1968	1976		
			(1 = highest)			(1 = lowest)		(1 = lowest)			
Italians	1	1	2	1	3	1	2	2	1	1	1
Spaniards	2	5	3	2	1	4	4	3	3	5	3
Greeks	3	4	4	4	2	2	1	1	4	3	4
Yugoslavs	4	2	1	3	4	5	5	5	5	2	2
Turks	5	3	5	5	5	3	3	4	2	4	5

SOURCES: Information by age, rural origin, and proportion skilled before migration in 1971 is from U. Mehrländer, *Soziale Aspekte der Ausländerbeschäftigung* [Social aspects of the employment of foreigners] (Bonn-Bad Godesberg, Verlag Neue Gesellschaft, 1974), pp. 24-28, and 36. Data on marital status and proportion skilled in Germany for 1968 are from *Ausländische Arbeitnehmer: Ergebnisse der Repräsentativuntersuchung vom Herbst 1968*, Beilage zur ANBA Nr. 8/70 vom 28 August 1970 (Nürnberg, Bundesanstalt für Arbeit, 1970). [Foreign employees: Results of a representative survey of autumn 1968, Supplement to ANBA No. 8/70 of Aug. 28, 1970 (Nürnberg, Federal Institute of Labor, 1970)], pp. 45, 53-54, 86, and from the author's own computations. And information for 1976 relating to marital status, proportion skilled before migration, and proportion skilled in Germany is from Forschungsverbund, "Probleme der Ausländerbeschäftigung," in *Integrierter Endbericht* (Bundesminister für Forschung und Technologie, 1979), [Joint Research Group, "Problems of the employment of foreigners," in *Integrated Final Report* (Federal Minister for Research and Technology, 1979)], pp. 56-58, 94, 117, and 130.

and trade liberalization are designed to boost incomes and employment in the migrants' countries of origin, these countries' past growth performance in the fields of income and employment should explain why some nationalities return home more than others. Data shown in table 4 do not confirm this reasoning as far as the short to medium term time horizon is concerned. Still, the last column suggests that in the very long term, when aid and trade may have lifted per capita incomes in the poorer countries to a much higher level, it may well be that return flows to the then better-off countries of origin will rise. However, for the time being this remains speculation, and there are flaws in the GNP or income concept that one should not simply overlook.⁹ Of course, this reasoning must not be mistaken as an argument against aid or trade liberalization.

It is conceivable that some or all of the selection criteria and aid or liberalization measures taken together would explain why some nationalities return and others do not. But this, too, is speculation and cannot be corroborated with the data available. Furthermore, cumulative selection criteria are difficult to administer efficiently and the migrants' ingenuity at finding their way around administrative obstacles is well known.

We are left with the empirical observation that *nationality* as such tells one better than any other factor whether migrant workers are likely to stay or return. Although it is sometimes difficult to explain what "nationality" means—other than holding a passport and presumably being of a certain ethnic background—it appears to be crucially important to know which nationality one is dealing with. For, if nationalities are characterized by secular tendencies to stay or return, incentives or constraints will not be able to change these tendencies markedly. Raw political force might, but Western democracies are neither internationally nor ideologically free to employ such force.

Lessons for host nations

If guestworkers' propensity to return voluntarily cannot be accurately predicted on the basis of policy variables other than nationality, what lessons does this hold for nations contemplating labor importation? First, one should accept high or low temporariness rather than try to manipulate it. A further lesson is that one should not create expectations among the resident population regarding the return of guests that are not substantiated by hard facts. If expectations concerning the duration of guestworker employment turn out to have been unrealistic, the policy will be in ruins.

Should potential host nations institute massive temporary worker programs instead of guestworker or enlarged traditional immigration programs? I believe that temporary worker plans for non-temporary jobs are incompatible with the fundamental tenets of Western democracy, the charter of the United Nations, the constitution of the International Labor Organization

Table 4. Predicting migrants' propensity to return by the growth of income and employment in their countries of origin, West Germany

Ranking by nationality	Propensity to return, 1961-76 (1 = highest)	Average annual growth rates of:				Level of per capita income in countries of origin, 1976 (1 = highest)
		per capita income in countries of origin:		labor force in countries of origin:		
		1960-76	1970-76	1960-69	1976-77	
		(1 = highest)		(1 = highest)		
Italians	1	5	5	5	4	1
Spaniards	2	3	3	3	3	2
Greeks	3	1	4	4	5	3
Yugoslavs	4	2	1	2	2	4
Turks	5	4	2	1	1	5

SOURCES: Data on growth rates and per capita income levels are from *Atlas* (Washington, World Bank, various years), and from "World Development Report, 1979" (Washington, World Bank, 1979).

and, most of all, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.¹⁰ It is perfectly legitimate to argue that foreigners do not have a right to enter a country. However, those who are voluntarily admitted—except perhaps foreigners destined to work in truly temporary activities—should be entitled to what the Universal Declaration of Human Rights calls free choice of employment (article 23 [1]); to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age, or other lack of livelihood (article 25[1]); and to protection for their families (article 16[3]). Western Europe's guestworker policies, by and large, respect the social rights of article 25(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and they freely admit and thereby protect families in some, albeit not yet all, cases. But they still subject the free choice of employment to a qualifying period (out-

side the European Economic Community and the Common Nordic Labor Market).¹¹ The trend of policies has been towards closer conformity with the principles of Western democracy; and a recent French attempt to reverse it has met with powerful domestic and international resistance.¹²

This reinforces the lesson drawn earlier. Temporary worker programs and restrictions are ideologically and politically less and less tenable in Western pluralistic societies. One can save oneself a great deal of domestic political and administrative commotion and loss of international standing by adopting from the start a position that is in conformity with the democratic values one espouses rather than having to yield to domestic and international pressures under inauspicious circumstances. □

———— FOOTNOTES ————

¹ W. R. Böhning, "Guest Worker Employment, with Special Reference to the Federal Republic of Germany, France and Switzerland: Lessons for the United States?" Working paper NB-5 (University of Maryland, Center for Philosophy and Public Policy, 1980).

² Illegals are, in principle, deportable. (Political grounds can also give rise to deportation.) Only Austria has clear legal stipulations according to which foreigners who have become a public charge can, in exceptional circumstances, be expelled. For the sake of correctness, it should also be mentioned that there are some untypical small-scale recruitment agreements which are temporary worker programs, such as the agreement between the Federal Republic of Germany and the Republic of Korea on miners, at present involving about 600 workers.

³ Bundesminister für Arbeit und Sozialordnung, "Politik der Bundesregierung gegenüber den ausländischen Arbeitnehmern in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland." [Federal Minister for Labor and Social Order, "The policy of the Federal Government towards foreign employees in the Federal Republic of Germany."] Bonn, Deutscher Bundestag, 6. Wahlperiode, Drucksache VI/3085, 31. January 1972.

[German Parliament, 6th Session, Print No. VI/3085, Jan. 31, 1972.]

⁴ Böhning, "Guest Worker Employment," p. 17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-27.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-33.

⁷ *Ibid.*, table 19.

⁸ See U. Hiemenz and K. W. Schatz, *Trade in Place of Migration* (Geneva, International Labor Office, 1979).

⁹ Böhning, "Guest Worker Employment," pp. 40-44.

¹⁰ See W. R. Böhning, "Regularising indocumentados" (Geneva, International Labor Office, 1979), World Employment Program Research Working Paper. Restricted; mimeographed; and "International Migration in Western Europe: Reflections on the Past Five Years." *International Labour Review*, July-August 1979, pp. 401-14.

¹¹ Restrictions are lifted after 5 to 10 years in Switzerland (depending on nationality), 8 years in Austria, 5 in Germany, 4 in France, 3 in Belgium and the Netherlands, and 1 year in Sweden.

¹² Böhning, "Guest Worker Employment," p. 7.