The Transnational Politics of U.S. Immigration Policy

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Scholarship across the social sciences has become increasingly focused on "transnational politics." The "transnational" signifier has been used to describe a number of discrete phenomena—from the networks of NGO activists invoking international norms in particular domestic conflicts to transnational migrants engaging in homeland politics—. However, a unifying theme in much of this research has been the emphasis on grassroots, non-state actors that take advantage of opportunities presented by the technological advances and economic integration characterizing the current round of "globalization" to construct a politics that crosses national boundaries.

Given this recent focus, one might expect that Marc R. Rosenblum's provocatively titled monograph, *The Transnational Politics of U.S. Immigration Reform*, would deal with novel forms of political action initiated by Mexican transnational migrants or activist networks linking up across the Mexico-U.S. divide. After all, Mexican migrants are the largest immigrant group in the United States, and they and their advocates have increasingly engaged in transnational political activity by seeking immigration reforms through labor unions, hometown associations, and migrants-rights organizations. *The Transnational Politics of U.S. Immigration Policy*, however, does not fulfill that expectation.

Eschewing the current cross-disciplinary dabbling of many scholars of "transnational" phenomena, Rosenblum remains firmly planted within his discipline of political science and places his attention on state actors, not the grassroots. Despite the restrictive boundaries this state-centric focus creates, Rosenblum has skillfully crafted a concise monograph that seeks to develop a theoretical model capable of explaining immigration policy outcomes in the conflict-ridden policy-making environment of the United States. In an attempt to capture the dynamics and variation of policy outcomes, the author synthesizes dominant perspectives in the subfields of comparative politics and international relations to create an "intermestic" model of immigration policy formation.

The monograph's five chapters draw on an impressive set of some

120 elite interviews with elected officials, policy makers, NGO officials, and academics from Mexico, Central America, and the United States. In Chapter 1, Rosenblum sets out the theoretical problem: how to explain contradictory trends in U.S. immigration policy making, ranging from restrictive to more pro-immigrant legislation. His review of the literature suggests that analysts are often focused either on the competing desires of domestic interest groups or on the international aspect of immigration policy, but they rarely combine both levels of analysis. The author proposes a synthesis of these two approaches as a way toward a more comprehensive theory of U.S. immigration policy outcomes. His intermestic model, combining both domestic and international aspects into a "two-level game" approach, aims to explain the shifts and variations in immigration policy making that are inexplicable in earlier models.

Chapter 2 introduces the key elements of the monograph's formal theoretical model. Rosenblum argues that immigration policy outcomes are a function of the preferences, actions, and cost-benefit determinations of three key actors: the U.S Congress, the U.S. president, and migrant-sending states. The three actors are thought to have different preferences due to the "constituents" they represent and the level at which they assess policy impact. In describing their actions, Rosenblum effectively shows the limitations of other approaches, which see immigration policy as the sole domain of either the president or Congress. Although the task of approving legislation may fall solely to Congress, the executive branch is involved both during the legislative process and afterward, during the enforcement stage. Furthermore, migrant-sending states are shown to participate in migration-policy formation both directly, through their own policies aimed at controlling migration flows from the source, and indirectly, by lobbying state officials and policy makers or promoting co-ethnic lobbies within the United States capable of pushing the sending state's agenda.

The key piece of Rosenblum's theoretical model is the "strategic environment," which helps to shape the preferences of the different actors and their willingness to act on those preferences given the "payoff function," or cost-benefit ratio, likely under particular circumstances. The strategic environment is made up of two key independent variables, one domestic and one international, that help explain the variation in immigration policy. The "domestic salience" of migration policy refers to the level of popular attention paid to migration policy in the United States, whereas the "foreign policy value" of migration policy refers to the importance of migration in shaping the bilateral relationship with particular states combined with the overall importance of those states to the larger U.S. foreign policy agenda. The interaction of these two variables creates a four-square typology of possible policy outcomes.

At the core of the monograph are Chapters 3 and 4, which explore these different policy outcomes and test the model's validity and predictive capacity against the empirical record of policy making during the last two decades in the context of U.S. relations with Mexico and Central America. The period leading up to the passage of the IRCA or Simpson-Rodino reforms (1984 through 1986) is presented as an example of "mass politics," which arose in response to the increasing salience of immigration in the aftermath of the Mariel boatlift and in a context of low foreign policy value, at least in relation to Mexico and Central America. The period after IRCA's passage (1988 through 1990) is presented as an example of "client politics," which resulted from the combination of immigration's low domestic saliency (Congress having finally acted in 1986) and low foreign-policy value. This second combination made possible more permissive policies, such as the settlement of the American Baptist Church case regarding Central American asylum petitions and the 1990 Immigration Act.

Chapter 4 goes on to examine policy making under conditions of high foreign policy value. The combination of high foreign policy value and high domestic salience creates periods of "inter-branch conflict." This type of policy-making environment is illustrated by the disagreements between Congress and the executive over the treatment of Salvadoran and Nicaraguan asylum applicants at the height of the Central American conflicts and over the particulars of the get-tough stance on "illegal" immigration and border enforcement adopted in the mid-1990s under the Clinton administration. Finally, high foreign policy value combined with low domestic salience creates a period of "immigration as foreign policy." This combination arose after the approval of strict anti-immigrant legislation in 1996, and it provided the conditions for President Clinton to seek reforms to asylum regulations that would provide relief for Salvadoran and Guatemalan applicants. However, lingering conflicts with Congress resulted in a reform package that treated Nicaraguan and Cuban applicants significantly more generously than their Salvador and Guatemalan counterparts.

Overall, the monograph provides a welcome correction to overly simplistic one-level models of immigration policy formation. I must, however, mention a few concerns. First, although the theoretical model seems to provide an orderly categorization of policy-making episodes, we should question its predictive capacity. This concern arises from the fact that the key variables making up the "strategic environment" are difficult to operationalize and measure. This measurement problem is most apparent with the "domestic salience of immigration"—defined as the amount of "popular attention" given to the issue—. Can this concept be measured accurately—as Rosenblum seems to suggest—by the amount of newspaper, television, and magazine

coverage dedicated to immigration? Without more direct measures of popular opinion and attention, categorizations of the salience of the issue appear quite problematic.

An additional problem, and one that is particularly important given that the monograph addresses the "transnational" dimension of the policymaking process, is that Rosenblum's analysis of the foreign policy value of immigration does not include any assessment of domestic preferences and demands *in the migrant-sending countries*. This is perhaps the book's most important limitation, and it is a remnant of the exclusive focus on state actors.

On this point, a richer—and truly transnational—analysis would focus on the political conditions in the sending countries rather than assuming that sending-state preferences are determined by calculations of static political-economic benefits and sociopolitical costs made by officials in those states. It is here that the absence of attention to transnational grassroots challenges and the demands of migrants themselves are most apparent. With this limitation in mind, it seems that a more appropriate allusion in the book's title would have been to the "intermestic" rather than the "transnational" politics of immigration policy.