The effects of migration policy on migrant selectivity and their labour market outcomes

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Abstract

Recent debates challenge the assumption that immigration policy is uniformly restrictive. Instead, contemporary policies increasingly shape the composition of inflows, targeting who migrates rather than the number of migrants. This paper investigates how policy restrictiveness affects educational selectivity—the degree to which migrants are more or less educated than peers in their origin countries—and how selectivity shapes labor market integration. I further examine whether selectivity mediates the relationship between policy and outcomes, and whether policy moderates the effect of selectivity on employment and occupational status. By connecting these three strands of research, the study addresses a gap in the literature, which often treats policy, selectivity, and integration in isolation.Using rounds 1–11 (2002–2024) of the European Social Survey (ESS) and the Barro-Lee educational attainment dataset, I measure migrant educational selectivity relative to origin country, gender, and birth cohort. Policy restrictiveness is captured via the Immigration Policies in Comparison (IMPIC) dataset, focusing on labor migration regulations. Preliminary results indicate that migrants are largely positively selected, with average selectivity percentiles around 0.78–0.79. Regression analyses show that policy restrictiveness has a small and statistically insignificant effect on educational selectivity once origin, destination, and year-of-migration fixed effects are included. Building on these findings, further analyses will explore whether selectivity mediates or interacts with policy to shape labor market outcomes, and decompose the relative contribution of policy versus origin and destination contexts.

1 Topic description and theoretical focus

A common assumption in migration research is that immigration policy has become more restrictive (de Haas et al., 2019). Yet recent studies point to a more liberalizing trend in migration policy, reducing barriers to entry and stay for certain groups such as low-skilled workers (de Haas et al., 2018; Helbling and Kalkum, 2018). Rather than simply opening or closing borders, contemporary migration policy increasingly seeks to shape the composition of inflows, targeting who migrates rather than how many (de Haas et al., 2020). This raises an important question: to what extent does policy influence the characteristics of migrants?

At the center of migrant composition is the idea of migrant selectivity: the degree to which migrants differ from non-migrants in their origin countries. Because migration involves costs and risks, migrants are often positively selected: more educated, motivated, or resourceful than those who stay (Feliciano, 2020). Educational selectivity is important as it shapes labor market success (Borjas, 1987;Hamilton, 2014), health inequalities (Feliciano, 2020), and the educational attainment of the second generation (Feliciano, 2005; Van de Werfhorst and Heath, 2019). Despite this, we know relatively little about whether migration policy influences educational selectivity, and how this affects labor market integration of migrants. Luthra and Platt (2023) provide suggestive evidence that policy regime matters for selectivity: Migrants arriving under free movement are consistently less positively selected.

Furthermore, while some studies find positive selection improves employment and occupational status (Cobb-Clark, 2003; Schmidt et al., 2022), others show weaker or inconsistent effects (Aydemir, 2011; Luthra and Platt, 2023). In other words, the selectivity hypothesis reaches different conclusions across time and space, suggesting that results might differ as a result of the migration policy a migrant faces at the time of their arrival. Moreover, policy may shape integration indirectly by selecting on attributes relevant for labor market success (Feliciano, 2020), suggesting a mediating role for selectivity. This paper therefore investigates: (1) whether policy restrictiveness affects educational selectivity, (2) whether selectivity affects labor market outcomes, and (3) whether selectivity mediates or interacts with policy to influence labor market integration. While most existing work focuses either on the effects of migration policy on volumes, or the effects of selectivity on different outcomes for migrants, the novelty of this project lies in connecting these three strands of literature.

2 Data and measures

Migrant selectivity Since migrant selectivity involves the evaluation of immigrants in relation to the context of their country of origin, I follow Ichou (2014)'s novel approach to measure migrant's educational selectivity. To measure the level of education of a migrant and their employment status, I use rounds 1-11 (2002-2024) of the European Social Survey (ESS). Since many individuals only complete their education in their late twenties, the sample is restricted to only those migrants who were older than 25 at the time of migration.

I use the Barro-Lee dataset to create a measure of educational selectivity. The Barro-Lee dataset combines almost 600 censuses and surveys from 146 countries in the period 1950-2010 by five-year periods. It captures the distribution of educational attainment in the adult population by gender in six categories: no formal education, incomplete primary, complete primary, lower secondary, upper secondary, and tertiary education (Barro and Lee, 2013).

To construct the relative level of education of the immigrant, I matched each individual from the ESS to the educational attainment distribution from the Barro-Lee dataset who share the same gender, country of birth, and birth cohort. In a next step I locate the educational attainment of

each immigrant within this distribution to create a variable of educational selectivity. The resulting measure, expressed as a percentile, indicates the share of individuals in the origin group with a lower level of education compared to the migrant, plus half the percentage of individuals with the same level (Ichou, 2014;Schmidt et al., 2022). In general, a value above 0.50 suggests positive selectivity and below 0.50 negative selectivity (Schmidt et al., 2022).

Migration policy restrictiveness The dataset most relevant to address this research question is the Immigration Policies in Comparison (IMPIC) dataset. The IMPIC dataset measures restrictiveness of immigration policies for 33 countries from 1980-2018. It includes measures focused on labor immigration, family reunification, refugee and asylum policies, and policies targeting co-ethnics. For all these fields IMPIC covers the restrictiveness of entry conditions and eligibility criteria that define the difficulty of obtaining legal residency in a country. Specifically, I will focus on the field of labor migration regulation. The variable is a continuous value between 0 and 1, where 1 implies the policy regime is very restrictive and 0 implies it is very liberal.

Summary statistics Table 1 and Table 2 show that migrants are overall very positively selected, face moderate policy restrictiveness, and migrate around age 36. The tables indicate similar patterns for men and women.

Table 1: Summary Statistics — Males

	Selectivity	Policy restrictiveness	Age at migration
N	5,369	5,369	5,369
Mean	0.783	0.489	36.458
Median	0.902	0.415	34
SD	0.243	0.244	9.545
Min	0.002	0.104	26
Max	1	1	84

Table 2: Summary Statistics — Females

	Selectivity	Policy restrictiveness	Age at migration
N	6,246	6,246	6,246
Mean	0.795	0.485	36.593
Median	0.907	0.418	34
SD	0.239	0.239	9.387
Min	0.003	0.104	26
Max	1	1	85

3 Preliminary results and next steps

Selectivity profiles Figure 1 illustrates the educational selectivity of migrants by region of origin. It shows that immigrants are mostly positively selected.

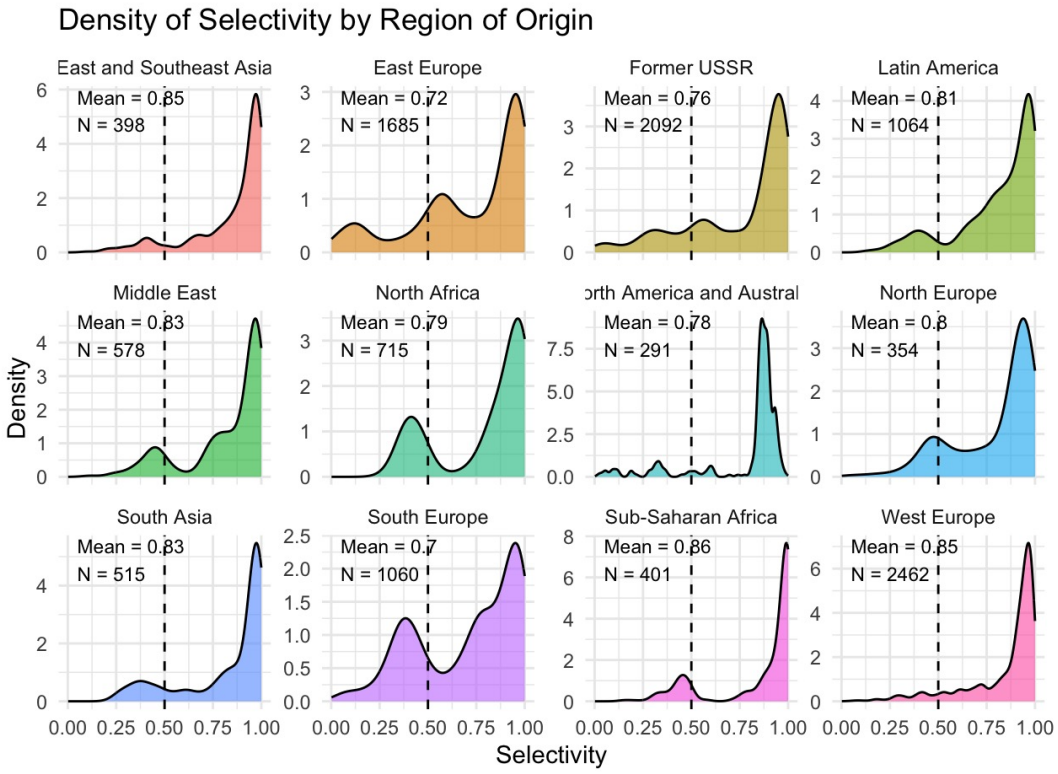

Figure 1: Density distributions of migrants' educational selectivity, shown separately by region of origin. The X-axis represents the educational selectivity percentile, indicating each migrant's relative education compared to individuals of the same gender, birth cohort, and country of origin (values above 0.5 denote positive selectivity). The Y-axis shows the probability density, reflecting how concentrated migrants are at different selectivity levels. Each facet includes the regional mean and the total number of migrants. Although the measure is calculated at the country-of-origin level, it is displayed here in aggregated form by region for illustrative purposes.

Preliminary regression results and next steps Table 3 shows that migration policy restrictiveness has a small and statistically insignificant effect on educational selectivity when no fixed effects are included. Once country, origin, and year-of-migration fixed effects are added, the effect remains negligible, suggesting that policy restrictiveness alone does not strongly determine who migrates in terms of relative education level. Other covariates, including age at migration, gender, and education level, show the expected associations with selectivity.

When disaggregating by origin (results not shown here), a small positive association between policy restrictiveness and selectivity emerges for EU-origin migrants in models without fixed effects, but this effect disappears once fixed effects are included. For non-EU-origin migrants, policy restrictiveness remains negligible, while other covariates maintain similar associations. Overall, these findings suggest that differences in migrant composition are primarily driven by origin and destination contexts rather than policy restrictiveness itself.

Building on the preliminary results, in a next step I will use a variance decomposition approach to quantify the relative contribution of policy restrictiveness, origin, and destination contexts to dif-

ferences in migrant selectivity. This will allow me to disentangle how much of the observed variation is attributable to macro-level policy versus individual or country-of-origin factors. In addition, the analysis will be extended to examine labor market outcomes, investigating whether educational selectivity mediates the relationship between policy and integration, and whether policy regimes moderate the effect of selectivity on employment and occupational status. By connecting policy, selectivity, and outcomes, these analyses aim to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how migration policies shape both the composition and the integration prospects of migrants.

Table 3: Effects of Policy Restrictiveness on Migrant Selectivity

	No FE	With FE
Dependent Var.	Selectivity	Selectivity
Constant	0.1277*** (0.0309)	-
Policy restrictiveness	0.0205 (0.0242)	0.0083 (0.0138)
Gender	0.0071. (0.0037)	0.0133** (0.0039)
Age at migration	0.0039*** (0.0002)	0.0048*** (0.0003)
Education level	0.1371*** (0.0060)	0.1546*** (0.0040)
Fixed Effects	No	Yes
cntry	No	Yes
cntbrth	No	Yes
year_of_migration	No	Yes
S.E.: Clustered	by: cntry	by: cntry
R^2	0.64164	0.79907
Within R^2	–	0.75625
Observations	11,347	11,347

Signif. codes: *** 0.001, ** 0.01, * 0.05, . 0.1

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