Visa Constraints and Marriage Choices: The Impact of H-1B Caps on International Students

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Introduction

The H-1B visa serves as the primary temporary work program for high-skilled foreign workers in the U.S. and is subject to numerical caps that affect labor market opportunities for nonimmigrant workers. While family- and employment-based visas are integral to U.S. immigration policy, little attention has been paid to the role of marriage to U.S. citizens as an alternative pathway for skilled migrants. Marriage to a citizen provides immediate access to permanent residency, circumventing the quotas and uncertainty associated with H-1B visas. This study investigates the effects of H-1B visa restrictions on the marriage choices of foreign doctoral graduates, contributing to the literature on high-skilled immigration and the returns to marriage. Relevant research has examined the economic effects of marriage on labor force integration (Meng and Gregory, 2005) and earnings (Furtado and Song, 2015), but the link between immigration policies and marriage decisions remains underexplored.

Methodology

This study leverages variations in H-1B visa availability from 1999 to 2009, including significant policy changes such as expansions in 1999-2003 and 2006, and a sharp reduction in 2004. The empirical strategy employs a quasi-experimental design, comparing marriage rates of foreign doctoral graduates from countries with and without access to alternative visas, before and after changes to the numerical limits. To identify marriage to a U.S. citizen, I introduce a measure based on the time required to obtain permanent residency, which was significantly shorter for spouses of U.S. citizens from that of permanent residents or non-residents. The main regression specification models the likelihood of marrying a U.S. citizen as a function of DiD indicators of the different policies, with robustness checks controlling for degree fields and demographic variations.

Results

The analysis reveals that H-1B visa restrictions significantly influence marriage choices among foreign graduates. During the 2004 cap reduction, graduates from countries without alternative visa options were 36.3 percentage points more likely to marry U.S. citizens than those from countries with alternative pathways. Conversely, periods of expanded visa availability (1999-2003 and post-2006) corresponded with reduced likelihoods of marrying U.S. citizens (-21

percentage points). These findings are robust to alternative specifications and highlight the sensitivity of personal decisions to immigration policy constraints.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates the unintended consequences of H-1B visa policies on marriage choices among high-skilled immigrants. The findings suggest that policy changes in employment-based visas can have far-reaching effects on personal and social outcomes. These results add to the understanding of how migration policies shape individual behaviors and contribute to broader debates on the intersections of immigration and family policy.

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