Reshaping the Bench:

Case Quotas' Impact on Immigration Courts*

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Abstract

This study examines the impact of a performance metric policy implemented during the first term of the Trump Administration (2017–2021), which required immigration judges to complete 700 cases annually to receive a "Satisfactory" rating. Intended to improve efficiency, the policy had far-reaching effects on immigration courts' composition and functioning. Using a quasi-experimental approach and administrative data spanning two decades, we find that the policy significantly increased judge departures, with particularly high turnover among female judges. These departures contributed to a loss of judicial expertise and, contrary to the policy's goal, led to fewer case completions and a higher share of cases decided in favor of respondents. These findings highlight how performance quotas can undermine institutional stability and judicial efficiency, underscoring the need to balance productivity targets with fairness in judicial systems.

*We are grateful to Ariel Binder and the participants in the 2024 APPAM meetings. Eduardo Polo-Muro acknowledges financial support from the Basque Government (POS-2021-1-0030) and the Department for Education, Universities, and Research of the Basque Government under research grant IT1336-19..

Keywords: Immigration policy, immigration courts, United States.

JEL Classification: K41, K42, J15, J18.

1 Introduction

One of the hallmarks of democratic systems is the separation of powers, which ensures judicial independence and safeguards impartiality. However, Immigration Courts, housed within the Department of Justice's (DOJ) Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR), operate under a unique structure. Immigration judges serve as civil servants reporting to the Attorney General while remaining subject to judicial branch review. This dual reporting system places them at the intersection of executive and judicial powers, creating a complex environment for maintaining judicial independence.

In October 2018, a quota policy was introduced, requiring immigration judges to complete a minimum of 700 cases annually to receive a "Satisfactory Performance" rating (GAO, 2017). This policy marked a significant departure from prior performance metrics and was introduced as part of efforts to address the growing immigration case backlog. While intended to enhance efficiency and reduce delays, the policy quickly became a focal point of public and scholarly debate. Critics expressed concerns that quotas could incentivize rushed decision-making and compromise case quality (Nielson, 2018; Rose, 2018), while others highlighted potential implications for migrants and their families. On the other hand, proponents viewed the policy as a necessary step to address longstanding inefficiencies in immigration court operations.

Existing research has examined some of the policy's consequences. For instance, Blasingame et al. (2023) document a nationwide increase in in-absentia removal orders and removal orders on the merits following the policy's adoption. While informative, their analysis focuses on case outcomes rather than judicial retention or court stability. Our study examines a related yet distinct question: how the policy influenced judges' decisions to remain in service and, in turn, affected court composition, experience levels, and operational efficiency. Given that judicial departures can reshape the expertise of the bench—factors critical to fairness and case processing—understanding these dynamics is essential for evaluating the broader implications of the policy.

Concerns over judicial stability have only intensified in light of recent developments. In early 2025, the Justice Department abruptly terminated multiple immigration judges,

further destabilizing an already overburdened system facing a backlog of 3.6 million cases (Ainsley et al., 2025). Reports indicate that many of the dismissed judges had been appointed under the previous administration, raising additional concerns about the politicization of the immigration court system and its ability to function effectively under increasing caseloads. These events underscore the urgent need to assess how policy interventions—whether performance metrics or politically motivated actions—affect judicial retention and, ultimately, court efficiency and fairness.

We assess how the quota policy's impact on immigration judge departures and its cascading effects on court composition, expertise, case completion, and decision-making. Using administrative data covering EOIR cases from 2000 to 2020 and employing a quasi-experimental difference-in-differences approach, we examine changes in judges' departure rates after the policy's implementation, with particular attention to differences by gender and race. Evidence suggests that female judges—who were already underrepresented on the bench—were disproportionately affected. Previous research has shown that gender-based differences in judicial decision-making (Cook, 1981; Boyd et al., 2010; Boyd, 2016) can influence case outcomes, making it important to understand how gendered patterns in judicial departures may have broader implications for decision-making and fairness.

Next, we analyze the policy's impact on immigration courts' performance, as captured by case completions—the policy's primary target. We find that case completions declined alongside a drop in judicial expertise following increased judge departures. A counterfactual analysis further underscores the policy's unintended consequences. Finally, we assess how these changes influenced judicial decision-making, focusing on the share of cases decided in favor of respondents.

Understanding how the quota policy influenced judicial departures, courts' composition, and functioning is critical, particularly given its stated goal of addressing the immigration case backlog.[1] These findings have important implications for debates on immigration

[1] In FY2022, 104 immigration judges were appointed, bringing the total to 649 by FY2023; nevertheless, the backlog rose to 2 million cases by FY2023 (CRS 2023).

reform, court management, and judicial independence. As immigration policy remains a key issue, balancing efficiency in case management with fairness and judicial independence is essential for safeguarding the integrity of immigration courts and protecting the rights of migrants and their families.

2 Institutional Framework

As mentioned in the Introduction, immigration judges are civil servants who report to the Attorney General. However, they are also expected to uphold the highest standards of judicial conduct, placing them at the intersection of the executive and judicial branches of government. Immigration judges oversee removal proceedings, during which a "respondent"—the individual accused by Immigration Customs Enforcement (ICE) of being removable—faces charges outlined in a Notice to Appear (NTA). The judge determines whether the respondent should be ordered removed or is eligible for relief from removal, such as asylum, for which they must apply. Either the respondent or ICE can appeal the judge's decision to the appellate division of the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR), known as the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA).

For decades, the sixty-nine immigration courts across the United States have struggled with a mounting backlog of removal cases, driven by a limited number of immigration judges to address the growing caseload. Despite ongoing hiring efforts, the backlog has continued to expand.[2] As shown in Appendix Figure A1, the backlog remained relatively stable in the early 2000s but began to rise in the early 2010s as case receipts outpaced completions. This trend accelerated after 2015, culminating in a sharp surge around 2019, likely due to policy changes, increased enforcement, and shifts in migration patterns. By 2020, the total backlog had reached unprecedented levels, underscoring systemic inefficiencies that have left thousands of cases unresolved. This persistent growth prompted the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) to issue a 2017 report recommending actions to address the backlog, including the implementation of performance measures for judges, such as case

[2]By FY2016, the number of pending immigration court cases had increased by 58% since the end of FY2012, reaching 518,545 (EOIR, 2016).

completion goals (GAO, 2017).

The Trump administration responded swiftly to the GAO's recommendations. In October 2018, then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced the "EOIR Performance Plan." Among other metrics,[3] the plan mandated that immigration judges complete at least 700 cases per fiscal year to receive a "Satisfactory Performance" rating (GAO, 2017; Nielson, 2018; Rose, 2018). This quota policy was perceived as a politically motivated effort to align judicial outcomes with the Trump administration's broader immigration agenda (Sacchetti, 2017; Benner, 2018; Long, 2018). While prior administrations had attempted to influence immigration courts to achieve policy objectives (Kim, 2018; Martínez and Martínez-Schuldt, 2018), few measures attracted as much attention as the mandatory case quotas, which represented a shift from aspirational to binding performance metrics. The National Association of Immigration Judges (NAIJ)—the union representing EOIR immigration judges—condemned the policy as a threat to judicial independence and due process rights guaranteed under the 14th Amendment (Bar, 2020).

Recent research has examined the implications of this policy. For instance, Blasingame et al. (2023) found that the quota policy prompted immigration judges who remained on the bench to issue more removal orders. A related question, however, is whether the policy also affected the composition of immigration courts by increasing judge departures (Alvarez, 2019; Hennessy-Fiske, 2020). Such departures may have reduced judicial expertise, disrupted case completion efforts, and influenced judicial decision-making. In the sections that follow, we address these issues by examining how immigration judges' departure rates responded to the quota policy and whether these responses varied by gender and race. We then investigate how the policy affected the expertise of judges who remained on the bench, as well as its implications for court case completion and decision-making.

[3]In addition to the 700-case completion quota for a "satisfactory" rating, judges were expected to maintain an appeals overturn rate below 15%, resolve motions and custody cases promptly, and meet at least half of other case management goals (EOIR, 2018).

3 Data and Some Descriptive Evidence

We rely on administrative records from the Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) on all immigration judges, cases, and hearings, before and after the October 2018 policy. The data records detailed information on every immigration court case, including the immigration judge in charge of the case and its outcome.[4]

Our primary aim is to gauge how the quota policy may have altered immigration judges' willingness to serve, as captured by their departures. With that goal in mind, we construct an unbalanced panel dataset with information on active immigration judges in any given year. Because immigration judges may start by serving as interns, we restrict our attention to immigration judges with a minimum of 75 cases per fiscal year and consider their departure year to occur when their case volume drops below 75 cases. This threshold yields a total of immigration judges that matches official records on the volume of immigration judges serving during the period under consideration. We also compute the total years of judicial experience for each immigration judge —information we later use to address changes in judicial expertise.

Relatedly, we aim to explore whether the adoption of the performance policy altered the composition of the judicial bench by prompting differential responses to the policy based on race and gender. Since the gender and race of each immigration judge are not directly observable, we assign them using information from two datasets. First, we utilize data from the University of California, Irvine Machine Learning Repository UCI (2020), based on Social Security card applications from 1880 to 2019. This dataset provides a list of names and enables us to assign the most likely gender to each immigration judge in our sample based on their names. Secondly, we rely on the database from Rosenman et al. (2022), which gathers information from voter files across six different states for 36 million individuals. This dataset uses voter files to link names to self-reported race. Using this information, we link each immigration judge's name with one of the following racial/ethnicity categories: White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Other. Overall, from the 738 immigration judges in our sample, we can assign gender to 701 and race/ethnicity to

[4]Details on how we clean the data are provided in the Data Appendix.

685 of them.

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics for immigration judges and courts in our sample. Panel A summarizes the characteristics of the 738 immigration judges observed between 2000 and 2020, including both new hires and those with longer tenures. On average, the annual departure rate of immigration judges was 5.06 percent. These judges handled an average of 902 cases per year and had 10.84 years of judicial experience. Based on name-based algorithms, we estimate that 39.15 percent of judges were female, while 79.81 percent were White.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Immigration Judges and Courts, 2000–2020

Statistic	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Column	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Panel A: Immigration Judge Level Dataset				
Departure Rate	0.0506	0.2194	0	1
Completed Cases	902.30	537.27	79	4155.21
Judicial Experience	10.84	8.53	0	37
Female	0.3915	0.4880	0	1
White	0.7981	0.4016	0	1
N		5720		
Panel B: Immigration Court Level Dataset				
Share of Departures	0.0305	0.0771	0	1
Judicial Experience	10.15	2.76	1	21
Share of Judges Below Threshold	0.3869	0.4558	0	5
Case completion	3705.606	3745.253	4	29833
Share Granted Cases	0.1195	0.1040	0	0.6712
N		1,176		

Notes: This table presents the differences in descriptive statistics for judges and courts before and after 2017, covering the period from 2000 to 2020. In Panel A, the departure rate represents the average proportion of judges leaving the bench in a given year. In Panel B, the *Share of Departures* refers to the average proportion of judges departing annually at the court level, while the *Share of Judges Below the Threshold* indicates the average proportion of judges completing fewer than 700 cases per year at the court level. Additionally, this panel reports the average years of judicial experience, the average number of case completions per court, and the share of cases decided in favor of the respondent.

Panel B presents court-level statistics for the 57 immigration courts in our sample, covering the same 2000–2020 period.[5] On average, 3.05 percent of judges at a given court left their positions annually. On average, 38.69 percent of immigration judges at these

[5]We focus on consistently operating courts throughout the sample period to ensure comparability over time.

courts were below the case completion threshold. Courts completed an average of 3,706 cases per year, while 11.95 percent of cases were granted.

Table 2: Changes in Judicial and Court Outcomes Pre- and Post-Quota Policy

Column	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Statistic	Mean Pre	Mean Post	(2) - (1)	P-Value
Panel A: Immigration Judge Level Dataset				
Share of Judges Below Threshold	0.3327	0.4305	0.0978***	0.000
	(0.4712)	(0.4953)		
Departure Rate	0.0397	0.0779	0$\dot{0}$382***	0.000
	(0.1953)	(0.2681)		
N	4078	1642		
Panel B: Immigration Court Level Dataset				
Share of Judges Below Threshold	0.2556	0.4215	0.6895***	0.000
	(0.2157)	(0.2121)		
Share of Departures	0.0158	0.0932	0.0774***	0.000
	(0.0417)	(0.1380)		
Judicial Experience	10.7295	7.7078	-3.0216***	0.000
	(2.3758)	(2.9269)		
Case completion	3473	4693.813	1220.753***	0.000
	(3550.5)	(4350.308)		
Share Granted Cases	0.1135	0.1197	0.0061***	0.409
	(0.1007)	(0.0968)		
N	952	224		

Notes: This table presents the differences in descriptive statistics for judges and courts before and after 2017, covering the period from 2000 to 2020. In Panel A, the departure rate represents the average proportion of judges leaving the bench in a given year, while the *Share of Judges Below the Threshold* indicates the average proportion of judges completing fewer than 700 cases per year. In Panel B, the *Share of Departures* refers to the average proportion of judges departing annually at the court level, while the *Share of Judges Below the Threshold* represents the proportion of judges failing to meet the completion quota at the court level. Additionally, this panel reports the average years of judicial experience, the average number of case completions per court, and the share of cases decided in favor of the respondent.

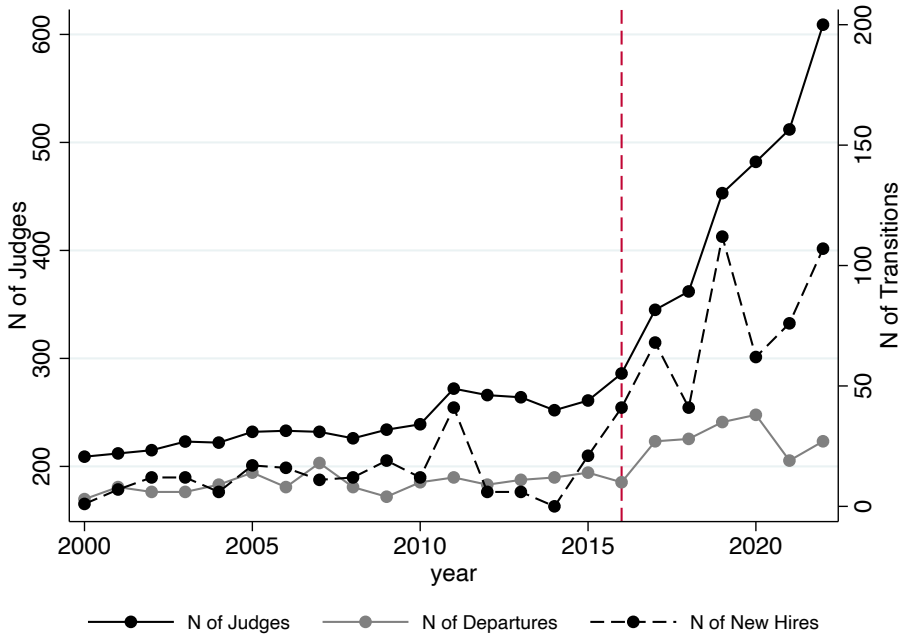
Table 2 examines key judicial and court-level outcomes central to our study before and after the adoption of the case completion quota policy. In Panel A, the departure rate at the judge level nearly doubled from 3.97% to 7.79%, suggesting increased job dissatisfaction or pressure. Additionally, the share of judges failing to meet the quota increased, likely due to an influx of new hires.

In Panel B, departures at the court level rose from 1.58% to 9.32%, reinforcing the policy's impact on judicial turnover at both individual and institutional levels. Similarly, the share of judges failing to meet the quota increased from 25.6% to 42.1%. While case completions per court increased by 1,221 annually, this coincided with a 3.02-year decline

in judicial experience, likely due to turnover and a shift toward a less experienced judiciary. Finally, case outcomes remained statistically unchanged.

Overall, these patterns suggest that the case completion quota policy significantly impacted judicial retention, workload pressures, and experience levels, underscoring the need to examine its broader consequences for judicial decision-making, court efficiency, and workforce dynamics.

Figure 1: Number of Judges, New Hires, and Departures



Notes: This figure shows the trends in active judges, departures, and new hires from 2000 to 2022.

Figure 1 illustrates the trends in the number of immigration judges, new hires, and departures (including both retirements and quits) from 2000 through 2022. The vertical dashed line marks 2016 —the year before the release of the GAO report that recommended case quotas for immigration judges. This year serves as the reference point for our event studies.

The total number of active immigration judges, represented by the dark solid line, has steadily increased since 2015. This growth has occurred despite a significant rise in departures, depicted by the lighter gray solid line, particularly after 2016 when the quota

policy was implemented. The key driver behind the growing number of active immigration judges has been the surge in new hires, shown by the dashed line, which began in 2014 and accelerated after 2016, outpacing the rate of judge departures.

Overall, the trends depicted in Figure 1 underscore the dynamic nature of the judicial workforce during this period, with the policy's likely impact on departures being counterbalanced, at least partially, by a surge in hiring. However, as Table 2 highlights, the growing number of judges may not have mitigated the potentially adverse effects of higher turnover, particularly the loss of judicial expertise and the increasing share of judges struggling to meet case completion targets.

4 Empirical Strategy

4.1 Quasi-Experimental Approach

Our primary objective is to assess how the quota policy influenced immigration judges' departure rates and, by extension, the composition, expertise, case completion, and decision-making of immigration courts. We begin by examining how immigration judges responded to the policy in terms of job separation by estimating the following difference-in-differences model:

$$Y_{j,t} = \alpha + \beta_1 BelowThreshold_{j,t} + \beta_2 BelowThreshold_{j,t} * Post_t + \zeta_j + \psi_t + \epsilon_{j,t} \quad (1)$$

where the dependent variable $Y_{j,t}$ is a binary indicator equal to 1 if immigration judge j was active during year t, and 0 otherwise.

The variable $BelowThreshold_{j,t}$ equals 1 if judge j fell below the case quota in year t and 0 otherwise. To ensure robustness, we consider two alternative definitions of treatment beyond the absolute 700-case threshold set by the policy:

Percentile-Based Treatment: Recognizing that the 700-case threshold may vary in significance from year to year due to fluctuating caseloads, we instead use its corresponding percentile rank in the policy's enactment year—the 37th percentile—as a benchmark.

Judges falling below this percentile in any given year are classified as treated, while those above serve as controls.

Continuous Treatment: To capture the intensity of the treatment, we use a continuous measure of the distance between a judge's annual case completions and the 700-case threshold. This approach assumes that the likelihood of departure depends on how feasible it is for a judge to meet the quota. Judges close to the threshold may exert additional effort to comply, while those far below it may be more likely to leave due to the perceived unattainability of the target.

Finally, to control for individual-level and temporal heterogeneity, equation 1 includes judge fixed effects (ζ_j) and year fixed effects (ψ_t). Judge fixed effects capture unobserved, time-invariant characteristics, such as work style or decision-making tendencies, while year fixed effects account for aggregate shocks affecting all judges, such as policy changes or broader labor market trends. Standard errors are clustered at the judge-year level to account for within-group correlation, ensuring robust inference.

Our primary interest lies in the coefficient for the interaction term, β_2, which captures the effect of the quota policy on the departure rates of immigration judges who failed to meet the quota, relative to those who met it, during the post-policy period. This term provides critical insight into the policy's impact on judges most affected by its performance standards and allows us to quantify the unintended consequences of the policy on judicial departures.

4.2 Potential Threats to Identification

There are a couple of potential threats to identification worth addressing. A first concern in estimating the effect of the quota policy on judicial departures refers to the dynamic nature of treatment assignment. Since judges' case completion numbers vary over time, the composition of the treatment and control groups may fluctuate across years, raising concerns about comparability. Our study design mitigates this issue in two important ways.

First, because our outcome of interest is separation, treated judges exit the sample upon

departure. This feature ensures that once a judge leaves the bench, they are no longer part of the dataset, preventing the possibility of direct comparisons between previously treated judges and those newly entering treatment. As a result, concerns about contamination due to shifting group composition over time are minimized.

Second, to further assess whether compositional changes influence our estimates, we conduct an additional robustness check by restricting the sample to judges who exit the bench during the study period. Since these judges experience treatment before permanently leaving, this approach allows us to test whether the estimated effects persist even when focusing only on those who transition out of the system. If the results hold in this subsample, it indicates that the observed effects are not solely driven by adjustments among judges who remain in treatment. Rather, they also capture the broader impact of the policy on judicial departures and court composition.

A second identification issue is whether any observed impacts emerged before the policy's adoption. To address this, we conduct an event study analysis to assess whether departures were already trending differently between immigration judges in the treatment and control groups prior to the policy's implementation. Beyond assessing differential pre-trends, the event study also allows us to evaluate the dynamic effects of the quota policy on immigration judges' departure rates. This approach sheds light on whether the response to the policy occurred immediately after its introduction, as well as whether the effects persisted or diminished following the policy's removal. The event study framework is represented by:

$$Y_{j,t} = \alpha + \sum_{\kappa=2000, \kappa \neq 2016}^{2020} \beta_\kappa BelowThreshold_{j,t} * 1\{t = \kappa\} + \zeta_j + \psi_t + \epsilon_{j,t} \tag{2}$$

where β_κ captures the dynamic effect of falling below the case quota threshold on judge departures for each fiscal year κ. Specifically, it measures the year-by-year differences in departure rates between the treatment group (judges who fell below the case quota threshold) and the control group (judges who met the quota), with 2016 serving as the baseline year. This specification allows us to account for potential changes in departure

rates before and after the policy's implementation, and to evaluate whether the effects occurred immediately or evolved over time.

5 Main Findings

5.1 Judicial Departures Following the Quota Policy

Our primary goal is to learn about how the adoption of the quota policy affected the departure of immigration judges. Table 3 addresses this first question with the coefficient estimates from equation 1. We estimate our model using three different samples and three distinct treatment definitions. In column 1, we include the universe of active immigration judges as defined earlier — specifically, judges completing a minimum of 75 cases per year, which ensures our sample aligns with the number of active judges reported by the EOIR.

Table 3: Quota Policy Impact on Immigration Judge Departures

Specification/Column	(1)	(2)	(3)
Panel A: Main Treatment			
Belowthreshold*Post	0.0354	0.1021***	0.0933***
	(0.0225)	(0.0306)	(0.0337)
Min. 3 Yr. Experience	No	No	Yes
Started Before 2016	No	Yes	No
R-squared	0.2298	0.2208	0.2357
Panel B: 37th Percentile Treatment			
Belowthreshold*Post	0.0479**	0.1107***	0.1043***
	(0.0202)	(0.0291)	(0.0315)
Min. 3 Yr. Experience	No	No	Yes
Started Before 2016	No	Yes	No
R-squared	0.2366	0.2286	0.2444
Panel C: Continuous Treatment			
Belowthreshold*Post	0.0572**	0.0911**	0.0967**
	(0.0228)	(0.0354)	(0.0420)
Min. 3 Yr. Experience	No	No	Yes
Started Before 2016	No	Yes	No
R-squared	0.2277	0.2153	0.2273
DV Mean	0.0397	0.0401	0.0425
Observations	5,640	4,860	4,049

Notes: This table presents the results from equation 1, estimating the impact of the quota policy on immigration judge departures across three alternative treatment definitions. Standard errors are clustered at the judge level.
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Note, however, that the estimated likelihood of departure using the entire sample of judges may be influenced by the inclusion of new hires — a group likely aware of the performance criteria when appointed. To address this concern, we consider two alternative sub-samples. *First*, we focus on immigration judges appointed before 2016 to exclude those who accepted their positions while aware of the new policy (column 2)—this is our main study sample. *Second*, we restrict the sample to judges with a minimum of three years of experience (column 3), as this duration allows for sufficient exposure to the job's demands and institutional dynamics, reducing the influence of short-term tenure effects on departure decisions.

Based on the estimates in Panel A, Column 1, the departure likelihood of active immigration judges increased under the quota policy, but this effect is not statistically significant. This lack of significance likely arises from the inclusion of newly hired judges, who were brought on after the quota policy was implemented. Including these judges masks the effect on those already serving under pre-policy conditions, as they would not have perceived the policy as a significant shift in expectations. When, instead, we focus on immigration judges already serving before the policy announcement—shown in Columns 2 and 3—the results indicate a statistically significant 10 and 9 percentage point increase in the likelihood of departure, respectively. These effects are substantial, corresponding to a departure likelihood that is approximately 2.5 times larger than the sample mean departure rate of 4%.

Two additional findings are worth noting. First, the estimated effects using the more sensible samples in Columns 2 and 3 appear robust to alternative treatment definitions. In Panel B, where treatment is defined as having case completions below the 37th percentile in a given year, the estimates remain positive and statistically significant. Specifically, the likelihood of departure increases by approximately 11 percentage points (Column 2) and 10 percentage points (Column 3), respectively, indicating a consistent policy impact.

Secondly, in Panel C, we employ a continuous treatment measure capturing the distance from the case completion threshold, expressed in standard deviations. The estimates suggest that for each standard deviation decrease in case completions relative to the

threshold, the likelihood of judge departure increases by approximately 9 percentage points (Column 2) and 10 percentage points (Column 3). This finding highlights a dose-response relationship, where judges further from meeting the quota faced a greater likelihood of exiting the bench.

Collectively, the estimates in Table 3 indicate that the quota policy was associated with a significant increase in judge departures, highlighting its disruptive effect on judicial retention.

5.2 Identification Checks

5.2.1 Accounting for Dynamic Treatment and Delayed Departures

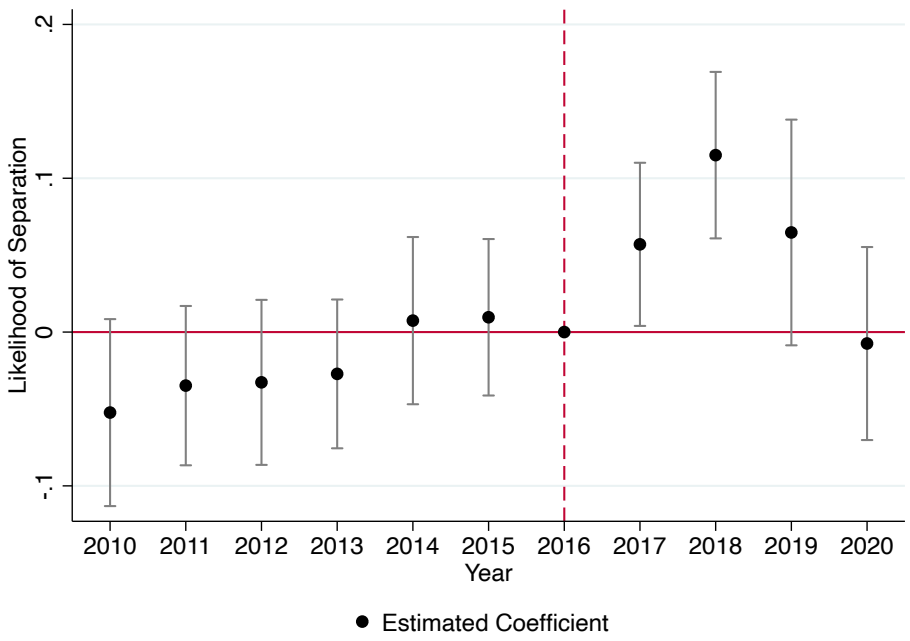
While the estimates in Table 3 provide strong evidence of the policy's effect on judicial departures, they do not fully capture the experiences of judges whose case completions fell below the 700-case threshold but remained on the bench temporarily before ultimately leaving. To address this limitation, we re-estimate the model using a dynamic treatment assignment approach, which allows for repeated exposure to treatment. This approach accounts for judges who transitioned in and out of treatment over time before exiting, thereby providing a more comprehensive estimate of the policy's impact on judicial departures. The results, presented in Appendix Table A1, show a statistically significant increase in departures across all specifications, with effect sizes ranging from 13.8 to 19.1 percentage points. Given the baseline departure rate of 4%, these estimates indicate that the policy's effect was substantial, with departure probabilities more than tripling under the quota system.

Notably, these estimates are larger than those in Table 3, where the preferred specifications (Columns 2 and 3) indicate a 9.3 to 11 percentage point increase in departures. This suggests that the estimates in Table 3 likely represent a lower bound of the policy's full impact, as they do not fully account for judges who experienced treatment intermittently before leaving. Moreover, these results further underscore the destabilizing effect of the quota policy on judicial retention, especially among judges who repeatedly fell below the threshold before ultimately departing.

5.2.2 Event Study Analysis: Timing and Dynamics of Departures

To further explore the timing and dynamics of judge departures, we present event study results based on our preferred sample from Column 2 of Table 3 and the most comprehensive model specification. Figure 2 displays the event study coefficients using the primary treatment definition—whether a judge's case completion volume falls below the 700-case threshold. Additionally, Figure 3 presents the event study results for two alternative treatment definitions: Panel (a) defines treatment as having an annual case completion volume below the 37th percentile of that year's distribution, while Panel (b) uses a continuous measure capturing the extent to which a judge's annual case volume falls below the 700-case quota.

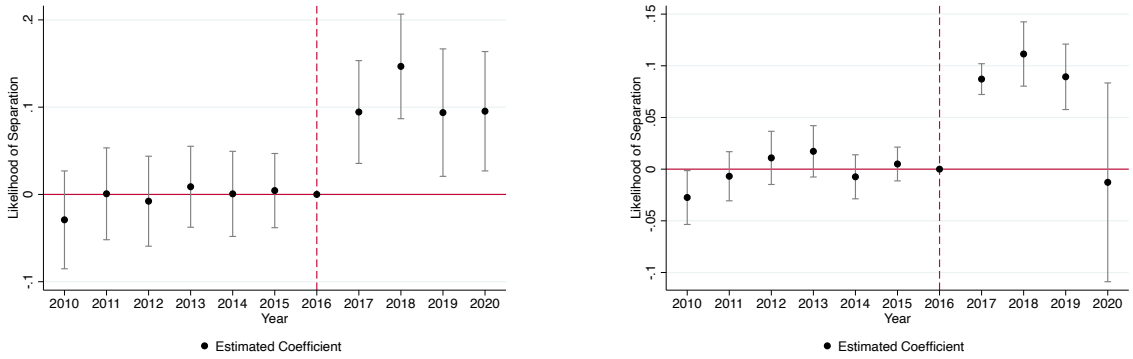
Figure 2: Event Study: Quota Policy Impact on Immigration Judge Departures



Notes: This figure presents the results from estimating equation 2, using falling below the 700-case threshold as the treatment. Judges appointed after 2016 are excluded. The omitted year is 2015, the year before the quota policy recommendation by GAO. The model includes judge and year fixed effects. Confidence intervals represent 95 percent bands, with standard errors clustered at the judge-year level.

In all three event studies, the likelihood of immigration judge departures remained stable before the 2017 Government Accountability Office (GAO) recommendation, supporting

Figure 3: Event Study: Quota Impact on Departures Using Alternative Treatments



(a) 37th Percentile

(b) Continuous Treatment

Notes: Panel (a) presents the event study results using the 37th percentile threshold as the treatment. Panel (b) estimates the same model but replaces the treatment with a continuous measure of how far below the 700-case quota a judge's case volume falls. Judges appointed after 2016 are excluded. Both models include judge and year fixed effects. Confidence intervals represent 95 percent bands, with standard errors clustered at the judge-year level.

the assumption of parallel pre-trends. This pre-policy stability lends credibility to the causal interpretation of the observed effects following 2017. In addition, after 2017, all event studies consistently show a marked increase in the likelihood of judge departures. This upward trend begins shortly after the GAO's recommendation in fiscal year (FY) 2017 and intensifies in FY 2018, coinciding with the implementation of the quota policy.

In Figure 2, which uses the binary treatment definition—whether a judge's case completion volume falls below the 700-case threshold—we observe a statistically significant increase in the likelihood of departure. By FY 2018, judges falling below this threshold were 10 percentage points more likely to leave compared to their counterparts above the threshold. Given the baseline departure rate of 5.06% reported in Table 1, this represents an almost threefold increase in departures.

Figure 3 presents similar patterns using alternative treatment definitions. In Panel A, which defines treatment as completing fewer cases than the 37th percentile of annual case completions, the post-policy increase in departures persists through FY 2019. In Panel B, the continuous treatment variable—capturing the distance below the 700-case threshold—reveals a dose-response relationship: judges with lower case volumes relative to the quota faced a higher likelihood of departure. The magnitude of this effect increases

with the severity of the shortfall, indicating that judges furthest from meeting the quota were particularly likely to exit.

In summary, the results from Table 3 and Figures 2 and 3 highlight the broader consequences of the quota policy. The policy accelerated judicial attrition, potentially straining court operations.

5.3 Heterogeneous Effects by Gender and Minority Status

Did the response of immigration judges to the quota policy differ based on their gender and race? This question is crucial because judges' traits may influence decision-making. Several theories have explained why female and racial minority judges might differ in their decision-making from their male and non-minority counterparts. The *different voice* theory, proposed by Gilligan (1982), suggests that men and women think, communicate, and perceive the world differently, leading to divergent decision-making processes based on their gendered perspectives (Sherry, 1986). *Information* theory, as discussed by Boyd et al. (2010), argues that female and Black judges possess unique expertise and backgrounds—such as experiences with discrimination—that can influence their decisions. Additionally, Farhang and Wawro (2004) and Kastellec (2013) posit that female and Black judges might act as *representatives* of their respective groups, potentially advancing their interests in their rulings. For instance, female judges might be inclined to make decisions that benefit women (Cook, 1981), while Black judges might let their race-based social identity affect their decisions in racially salient cases (McClain et al., 2009). Boyd (2016) further supports this, noting that female and Black judges may be more protective of plaintiffs compared to their male and White counterparts.

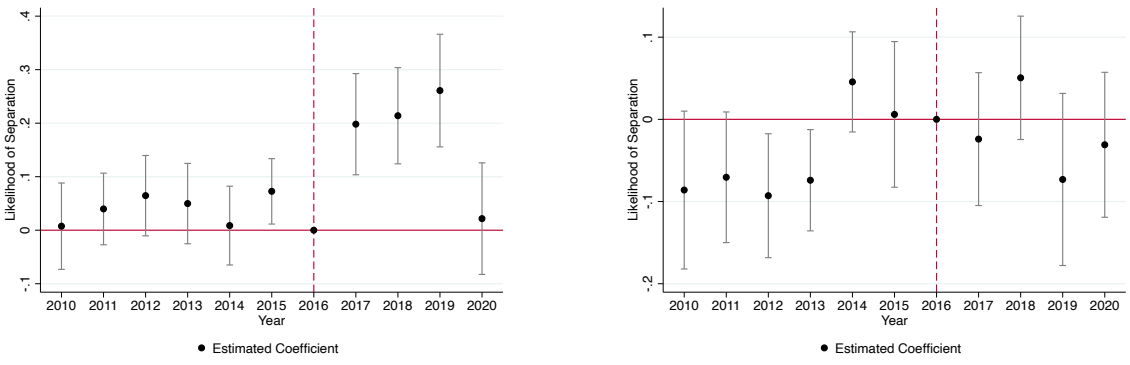
In the context of immigration adjudication, prior studies have found that female adjudicators are 44% more likely to grant asylum compared to their male counterparts, potentially reflecting implicit biases, distinct judicial philosophies, or different interpretations of the law (Menkel-Meadow, 2009). Similar patterns have been observed in other research, *e.g.* Beougher (2016), Chand et al. (2017), Keith et al. (2013), Ramji-Nogales et al. (2007), GAO (2008), and GAO (2016). These documented gender differences underscore the

importance of examining how the quota policy might have differentially impacted male and female immigration judges.

Figure 4 explores this question by presenting the departure likelihoods for female and male immigration judges separately. Panel A reveals that the departure likelihood for female judges began to rise slightly in 2015, well before the policy's implementation, but increased sharply in 2017 following the GAO recommendation and the introduction of the quota policy. By FY2017, the departure likelihood of female judges more than doubled and continued to rise until the COVID-19 pandemic.

In contrast, Panel B shows no comparable pattern for male judges. The departure likelihood for male judges remained relatively stable, with no statistically significant changes attributable to the quota policy. This divergence suggests that the policy had a disproportionate impact on female judges, raising important questions about the underlying mechanisms driving these differences. Future research should investigate whether these gendered patterns reflect distinct responses to policy-induced stress, differences in perceived job satisfaction, or structural disparities in workplace conditions for male and female judges.

Figure 4: Event Study: Quota Policy Impact on Departures by Judge Gender



(a) Female Judges

(b) Male Judges

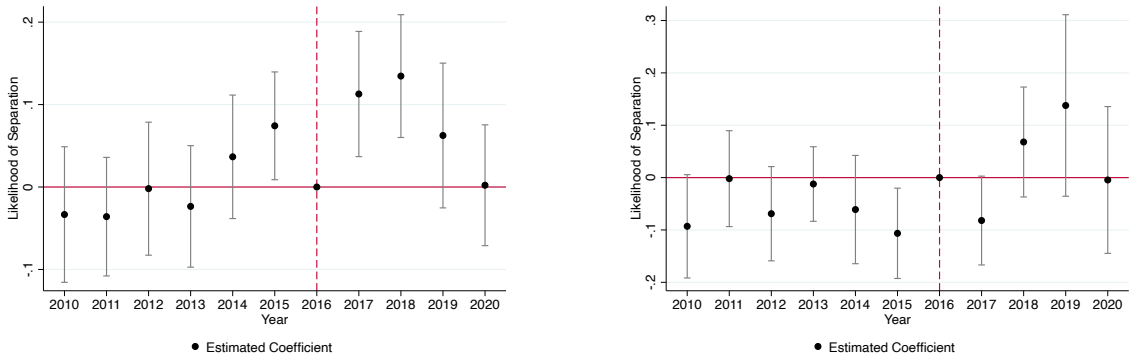
Notes: This figure presents the results from estimating equation 2 separately for male and female immigration judges, using the 700-case threshold as the treatment. The omitted year is 2015, the year before the quota policy recommendation by GAO. The model includes judge and year fixed effects. Judges appointed after 2016 are excluded. Confidence intervals represent 95 percent bands, with standard errors clustered at the judge-year level.

Did the policy also differentially impact immigration judges by race? Panel A of Figure

5 explores this question by examining the departure likelihood of White immigration judges. The results indicate that the quota policy led to a significant increase in their likelihood of departure, beginning in 2017 and peaking in 2018. This effect began to taper off in 2019 and disappeared entirely by 2020. These findings suggest that White judges, who constitute the majority of the sample, were particularly sensitive to the new performance standards introduced by the quota policy during its initial years of implementation.

Panel B of Figure 5 examines the impact on racial minority judges. Unlike their White counterparts, the departure likelihood of minority judges does not appear to have significantly changed in response to the quota policy. However, this result should be interpreted with caution. The smaller sample size of minority judges—approximately one-third that of White judges—reduces the statistical power to detect meaningful effects within this subgroup. Consequently, the absence of statistically significant effects may reflect limited power rather than the absence of a true policy impact. This limitation underscores the need for further research to better understand how performance quotas may affect minority judges, particularly given the distinct workplace challenges they may face.

Figure 5: Event Study: Quota Policy Impact on Departures by Judge Race



(a) White Judges

(b) Non-White Judges

Notes: This figure presents the results from estimating equation 2 separately for White and Non-White immigration judges, using the 700-case threshold as the treatment. The omitted year is 2015, the year before the quota policy recommendation by GAO. The model includes judge and year fixed effects. Judges appointed after 2016 are excluded. Confidence intervals represent 95 percent bands, with standard errors clustered at the judge-year level.

In sum, the quota policy significantly increased the likelihood of job separation among immigration judges, with particularly pronounced effects on female judges—who already represent a minority on the judicial bench. As previously discussed, this disparate impact by gender not only jeopardizes efforts to maintain a balanced composition within immigration courts but may also influence how cases are managed and decided, given documented differences in adjudication patterns between male and female judges. These findings underscore the broader implications of the policy for the diversity and functionality of the immigration judiciary.

6 Implications for Justice Delivery

6.1 Immigration Judge Departures and Judicial Expertise

A secondary aim of our study is to assess how the policy may have affected the functioning of immigration courts through the increased likelihood of immigration judge departures. One potential consequence of this policy is a shift in the courts' judicial expertise. Did the policy incentivize the departure of more experienced immigration judges? Understanding whether this was the case is crucial, as it may have impacted not only the volume of departures but also case completion and judicial decision-making.

To address this inquiry, we aggregate our data at the court and year levels to calculate various outcomes —namely, the share of departing judges, the average judicial experience of judges remaining on the bench, the volume of cases completed, the number of cases decided in favor of respondents, and the share of cases decided in favor of respondents by court and year. Next, we create a continuous treatment variable at the court-year level —namely, the share of immigration judges with case volumes below the policy threshold in each court in any given year (*i.e.*, $Share_{c,t}$). Using the aggregated data, we proceed to estimate the following model:

$$Y_{c,t} = \alpha + \sum_{\kappa=2000, \kappa \neq 2016}^{2020} \beta_\kappa Share_{c,t} * 1\{t = \kappa\} + \zeta_c + \psi_t + \epsilon_{c,t} \tag{3}$$

where $Y_{c,t}$ is the court-level outcome variable of interest, starting with the share of judges departing —to later on focus on average judicial experience, case completion rate, and the share of cases decided in favor of respondents.

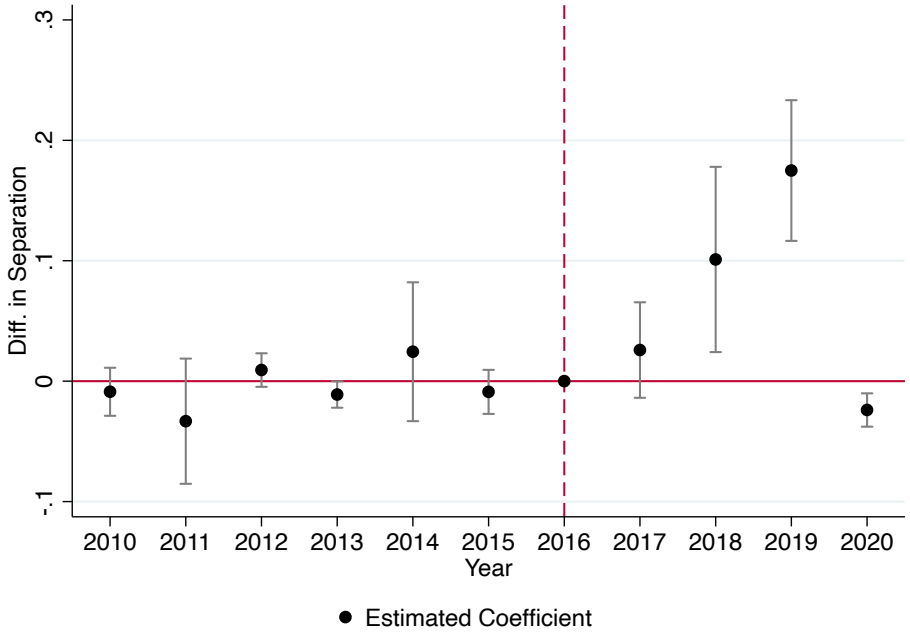
The vector β_κ captures how year-by-year variations in the share of immigration judges with case completion volumes below the quota threshold at each court influence key outcomes, including the share of departures, judicial expertise, case completion volumes, and the share of cases decided in favor of respondents. Each β_κ represents the effect in fiscal year κ, relative to the base year, 2016.

We begin by validating our previous findings at the aggregated court level. As shown in Figure 6, judicial departures increased significantly across immigration courts in FY2018 and FY2019, consistent with earlier judge-level findings. A 10 percentage-point increase in the share of treated judges is associated with a 0.22-percentage-point increase in departure rates in 2018 and a 0.43-percentage-point increase in 2019. Given the mean court departure rate of 3.05% (Panel B, Table 1), these effects amount to absolute increases of approximately 7.2 percentage points (2018) and 14.1 percentage points (2019) relative to the average court departure rate. These findings underscore the sensitivity of judicial departure rates to changes in the share of treated judges, reinforcing the broader impact of the quota policy on judicial retention.[6]

Building on this evidence of higher separation rates in courts with a larger share of treated judges, we now examine whether this increased judicial turnover disrupted court efficiency, particularly by affecting case completions and backlog reduction. To achieve this aim, we start to address these questions by examining how these departures may have affected the average level of judicial expertise among the remaining judges on the bench. To start to address this question, Panel A in Figure 7 illustrates how the average experience of active immigration judges trended over the study period. The plot reveals a concerning decline in judicial expertise that started in 2015 and accelerated during the running-up to the presidential elections in 2016 as the anti-immigrant rhetoric intensified (Eshbaugh-Soha and Barnes, 2021; Richey, 2023). The decrease in judicial experience

[6] All event study estimates for the court-level analyses are provided in Appendix Table A2 for reference.

Figure 6: Event Study: Quota Policy Impact on Court-Level Departures



Notes: This figure presents the results from estimating equation 3 using the share of immigration judge departures at the court level as the outcome variable. The omitted year is 2015, the year before the quota policy recommendation by GAO. The model includes court and year fixed effects. Confidence intervals represent 95 percent bands, with standard errors clustered at the court-year level.

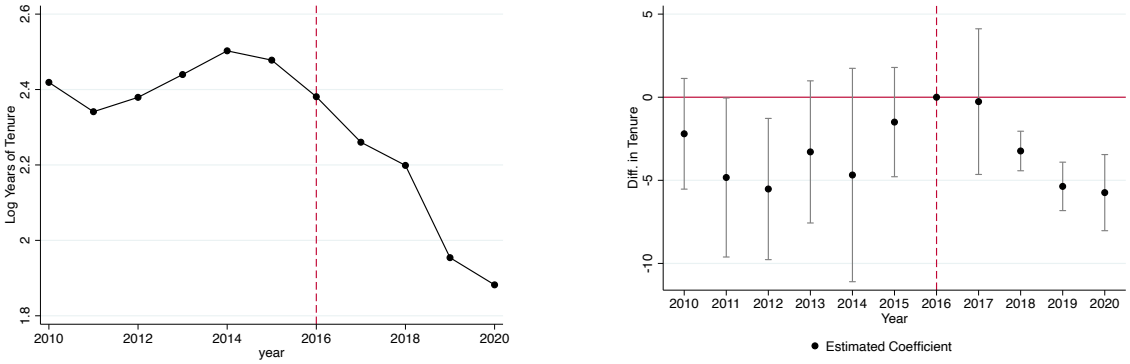
became particularly acute from 2017 through the pandemic, coinciding with the GAO's report recommendation and the quota policy adoption. However, did the quota policy truly contribute to this trend?

To answer this question, the figure in Panel B of Figure 7 presents the event study estimates corresponding to the estimation of equation 3, where the dependent variable is the average judicial experience at the court level.

As shown in Panel A of Figure 7, a consistently declining trend in average judicial experience emerged in the years immediately following the adoption of the quota policy. This contrasts with the relatively stable trends observed before its implementation. According to Table 1, the mean judicial experience across immigration courts stood at approximately 10 years, reflecting a workforce of seasoned judges before the policy's enactment.

Using the estimates from Panel B, a 10 percentage-point (0.10) increase in the share of treated judges is associated with a reduction of approximately 0.5 years of average

Figure 7: Trends and Event Study: Quota Policy Impact on Judicial Experience



(a) Average Judicial Experience

(b) Effect on Judicial Experience

Notes: Panel (a) plots the logarithm of the average experience of active immigration judges over time. The red dashed line marks 2015, the year before the quota policy recommendation by GAO. Panel (b) presents results from estimating equation 3, using average judicial experience at the court level as the outcome variable. The model includes court and year fixed effects. Confidence intervals represent 95 percent bands, with standard errors clustered at the court-year level.

judicial experience per court. This reduction represents a 5 percent decline relative to the mean judicial experience at the court level. Furthermore, the policy's impact intensified over time, with more experienced judges disproportionately likely to depart, leading to an accumulated reduction in experience that stabilized at approximately 5 years of lost judicial expertise by 2019 and 2020 in courts with the highest shares of treated judges.

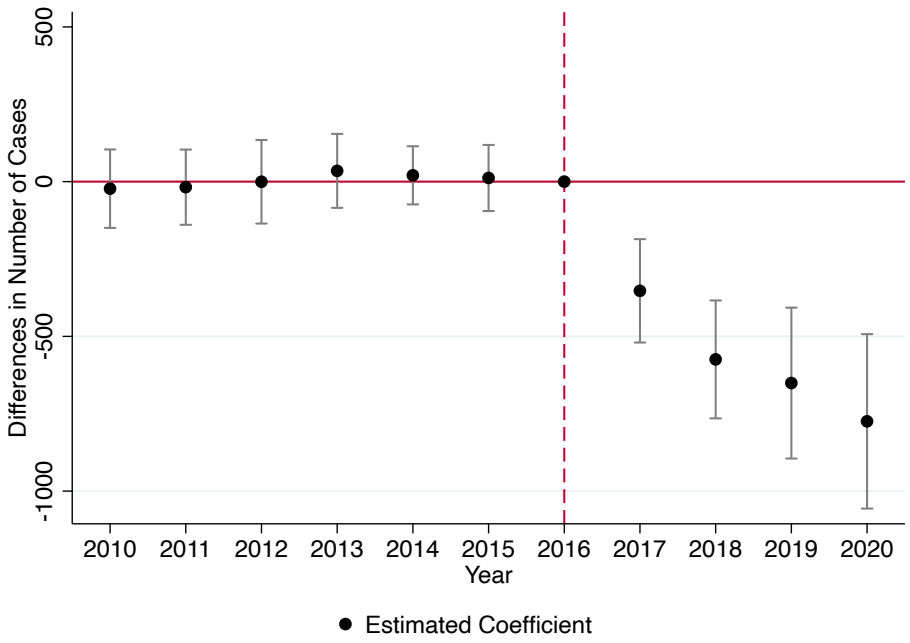
Summarizing, the findings from Figures 6 and 7 underscore how the quota policy inadvertently accelerated the attrition of experienced judges, significantly altering the expertise of immigration courts. The resulting decline in judicial expertise may have affected both the quality and efficiency of decision-making, potentially undermining the courts' capacity to address the growing case backlog—an issue we explore next.

6.2 Quota Policy Implications on Case Completion

Did the quota policy affect case completion rates after reshaping the composition and reducing the judicial expertise of immigration courts? This question strikes at the core of the policy's intended purpose. To address it, we explore how the share of treated judges at any given court may have altered case completion and resolution.

Figure 8 presents the event study estimates derived from equation 3, where the

Figure 8: Event Study: Quota Policy Impact on Case Completion



Notes: This figure presents the results from estimating equation 3 using case completion at the court level as the outcome variable. The omitted year is 2015, the year before the quota policy recommendation by GAO. The model includes court and year fixed effects, as well as court-level specific linear trends. Confidence intervals represent 95 percent bands, with standard errors clustered at the court level.

dependent variable is the number of case completions at the immigration court level. The results indicate a significant decline in case completion volumes in courts with a higher share of judges adversely affected by the quota policy. Specifically, a 10 percentage-point increase in the share of treated judges is associated with approximately 155 fewer resolved cases per court annually, amounting to an estimated 4,650 fewer cases resolved each year across all 69 immigration courts. Between 2017 and 2020, these effects accumulated to a total decline of approximately 620 fewer resolved cases per court, translating to a nationwide shortfall of approximately 42,780 cases due to the policy.

To contextualize the magnitude of this impact, we estimate the policy's contribution to the growing immigration court backlog. When the policy was introduced in 2016, the backlog stood at 518,545 cases. By 2021—the final year of our analysis—the backlog had surged to 2 million cases, driven by systemic inefficiencies and external pressures. Our estimates suggest that, absent the policy, the resolution of an additional 42,780 cases could have slightly mitigated backlog growth. This represents a 2.14 percent reduction—modest

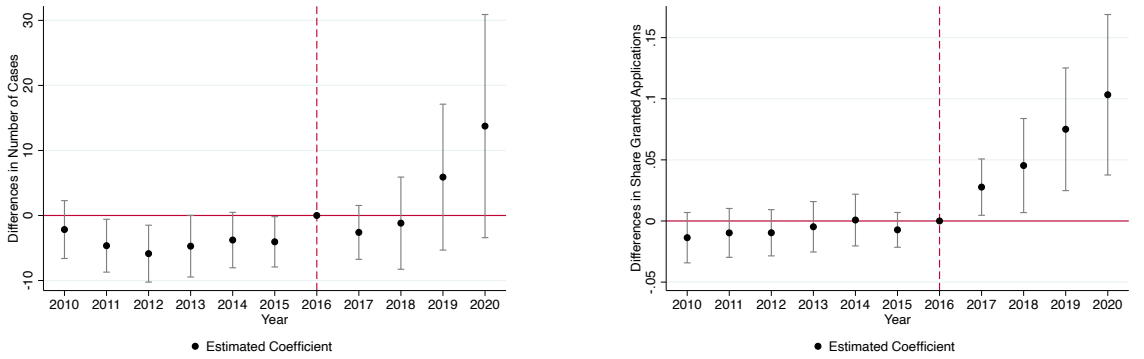
relative to the total backlog but indicative of how policy-driven inefficiencies accumulate over time.

With 539 immigration judges in 2021, this shortfall translates to approximately 79 additional pending cases per judge. While this figure may seem small in the context of a multi-year backlog, it highlights how incremental declines in court efficiency can compound over time, exacerbating the systemic pressures faced by the immigration court system. These findings underscore the unintended consequences of the quota policy, which—despite its intended goal of reducing the backlog—ultimately contributed to its growth by increasing judicial departures, reducing court-level efficiency, and straining already overburdened courts.

6.3 Quota Policy Implications on Granted Asylums

To conclude, we examine how the policy may have affected judicial decision-making in light of its observed impact on the composition of immigration courts. Figure 9 addresses this question by presenting event study estimates based on the estimation of equation 3, with the dependent variable defined as either the volume of cases decided in favor of migrants (Panel A) or the share of cases decided in favor of migrants (Panel B).

Figure 9: Event Study: Quota Policy Impact on Granted Decisions



(a) Effect on Granted Cases

(b) Effect on Share of Granted Cases

Notes: This figure presents the results from estimating equation 3 using the number and share of cases decided in favor of respondents at the court level. The omitted year is 2015, the year before the quota policy recommendation by GAO. The model includes court and year fixed effects, as well as court-level specific linear trends. Confidence intervals represent 95 percent bands, with standard errors clustered at the court level.

As shown in Panel A of Figure 9, having a higher share of immigration judges with case completion volumes below the quota threshold did not significantly alter the absolute volume of cases decided in favor of respondents per court yearly. The point estimates remain close to zero, with wide confidence intervals overlapping zero, suggesting no statistically significant changes in the number of granted cases attributable to the policy.

As a result, and given the drop in case completions at the court level shown in Figure 8, Panel B in 9 illustrates that the share of cases decided in favor of respondents rose significantly in the years following the adoption of the quota policy. It is important to clarify that this increase does not indicate a system-wide rise in the overall share of granted cases. Rather, it reflects a relative shift: courts with a larger share of judges falling below the threshold experienced a greater increase in the share of granted cases compared to courts with fewer affected judges. This pattern suggests that the policy's effects were concentrated in specific courts, rather than driving an aggregate change in case outcomes across the immigration court system.

From 2017 to 2020, the share of granted cases in the most affected courts increased from approximately 2.2% (0.022) to 11% (0.11), representing a fivefold increase over the post-policy period. A 10 percentage-point increase in the share of treated judges is associated with a 1 percentage-point increase in the share of granted cases. Relative to the mean share of cases granted in 2017 (2.5%), this corresponds to an approximate 40 percent increase in the likelihood of favorable outcomes for respondents in courts with a higher share of treated judges.

Rather than focusing on changes in individual judicial decision-making, our analysis highlights a different mechanism—shifts in court composition resulting from the policy. The increase in the share of favorable decisions largely reflects a mechanical effect driven by the sharp decline in case completions following the policy (see Figure 8). While prior research, such as Blasingame et al. (2023), finds an increase in the absolute number of removals after the policy, our analysis examines a different dimension—variation in case outcomes across courts. Specifically, courts with a higher share of treated judges saw a greater proportion of granted cases compared to courts with fewer treated judges,

reflecting how shifts in court composition influenced case resolution differently across courts. By focusing on granted relief and court composition, we provide a complementary perspective on how institutional constraints shape case outcomes in immigration courts.

7 Summary and Conclusions

The debate surrounding the case quota policy imposed on immigration judges highlights fundamental challenges to judicial independence within the Immigration Courts, part of the Department of Justice's Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR). This policy, which requires a minimum of 700 case completions per fiscal year for a "Satisfactory Performance" rating, has drawn significant attention and criticism. Opponents argue that such quotas may compromise the judiciary's ability to uphold due process and maintain impartiality in adjudicating immigration cases.

Our study examines the effects of this policy, focusing on immigration judge departures and their broader impacts on court functioning. Using administrative data from immigration court hearings before and after the policy's implementation, we employ a quasi-experimental approach to assess how immigration judges responded to the quota based on their case completions relative to the threshold. We find evidence of a significant increase in immigration judge departures following the policy's implementation, particularly among female judges, who were already underrepresented on the bench. More broadly, departures disproportionately affected judges with greater seniority, leading to a decline in overall judicial experience. This shift altered the composition of the bench in ways that may have had lasting implications for case processing.

These changes coincided with a decline in case completions, contrary to the policy's intent. The volume of completed cases per judge and court fell, contributing to a growing backlog. A back-of-the-envelope counterfactual estimate suggests that, in the absence of the policy, case completions might have been modestly higher, potentially slowing backlog growth.

At the same time, courts with a higher share of treated judges saw a relative increase

in the share of cases decided in favor of respondents compared to courts with fewer treated judges. This trend coincided with the shift in judicial composition following the policy, including the disproportionate departure of female judges, who research suggests are statistically more likely to rule in favor of respondents. These patterns suggest that changes in court composition may have influenced case resolution trends.

The increasing intrusion of executive power into judicial decision-making raises serious concerns about the autonomy and impartiality of immigration courts. The Justice Department's recent termination of multiple immigration judges amid a record case backlog highlights the system's vulnerabilities that remain subject to executive discretion (Ainsley et al., 2025). Policies intended to improve efficiency, such as case quotas, may instead exacerbate workforce instability and contribute to growing backlogs. Our findings suggest that such measures accelerate judicial departures, alter court composition, and ultimately reduce case completions—undermining the very goals they seek to achieve. While efforts to enhance efficiency are necessary, they must not come at the expense of judicial independence. As enforcement pressures and caseloads continue to rise, ensuring that immigration courts can function effectively without political interference remains a pressing challenge.

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Appendix

Data Appendix

The Executive Office for Immigration Review (EOIR) dataset provides comprehensive administrative records on all immigration cases processed in U.S. immigration courts. The data is organized into several distinct datasets, each containing specific details relevant to different aspects of court operations and judicial performance. We work with three main datasets.

The first dataset contains case-level information, including the assigned immigration court, the date of the final decision, and the type of immigration case. This dataset allows for the analysis of case processing trends, including case completion volumes and the share of cases decided in favor of respondents.

A second dataset focuses on hearing-level information, capturing details about the presiding immigration judge, the exact date of each hearing, and the court where the hearing was conducted. This dataset also provides information on judges' caseloads, which is critical for evaluating the impact of performance quotas on judicial productivity.

A third dataset provides judge-level information, including judges' full names, unique identification codes, work locations, and professional background details such as judicial experience. Judges' names are used to infer characteristics such as gender and race, which are relevant for examining patterns in judge departures and changes in court composition over time.

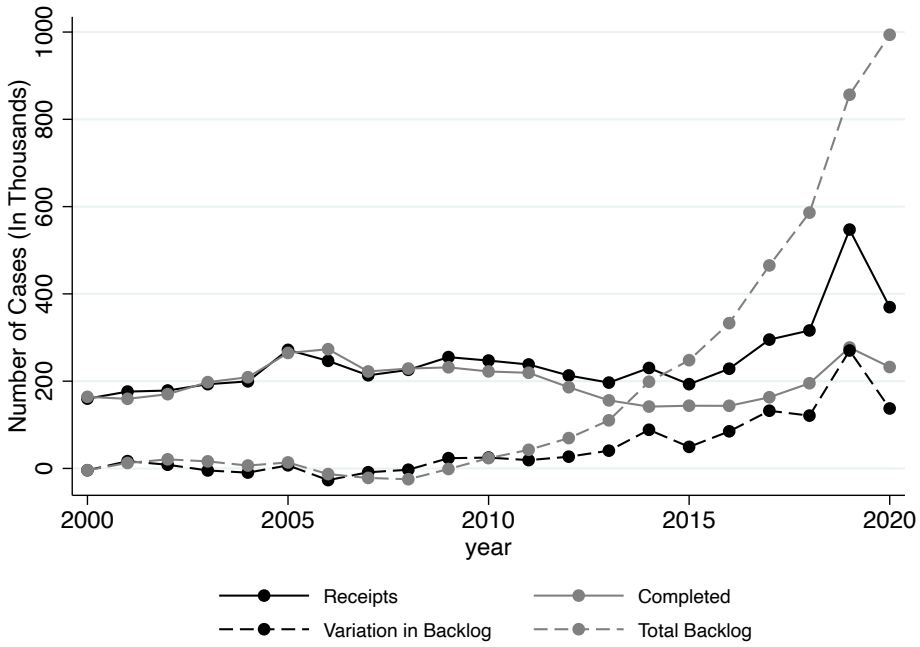
These datasets can be merged using case IDs and judge codes, enabling the integration of case outcomes with judge- and court-level information. This structure facilitates a comprehensive analysis of judicial departures, the evolution of court composition, shifts in judicial expertise, and changes in case completion rates and adjudication outcomes.

It is worth noting that the EOIR dataset was compiled following the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). While initially collected for administrative purposes rather than statistical analysis, the dataset provides robust information for empirical research. Like many large administrative datasets, it may include occasional

transcription errors and missing values, which are common in datasets of this scope and complexity. Researchers apply standard data cleaning and validation procedures to ensure the reliability of empirical analyses.

Appendix Figures and Tables

Figure A1: Case Backlog Trends, 2000–2020



Notes: This figure shows the evolution of new immigration case receipts and completions from 2000 to 2020. The dashed black line represents the net backlog variation, calculated as the difference between received and completed cases. The dashed gray line represents the accumulated backlog since fiscal year 2000. Data source: U.S. Department of Justice, EOIR (https://www.justice.gov/eoir/workload-and-adjudication-statistics).

Table A1: Quota Policy Impact on Judge Departures, Adjusting for Switchers

Specification/Column	(1)	(2)	(3)
Belowthreshold*Post	0.1380***	0.1836***	0.1909***
	(0.0226)	(0.0305)	(0.0292)
Min. 3 Yr. Experience	No	No	Yes
Started Before 2016	No	Yes	No
DV Mean	0.0397	0.0401	0.0425
Observations	1322	741	797

Notes: This table presents results from estimating equation 1, adjusting for judges who switched in and out of the sample. The model allows for only four pre-treatment periods. Standard errors are clustered at the judge level.
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table A2: TWFE Estimates: Quota Policy Impact on Court-Level Outcomes

Specification/Column	(1) 2017	(2) 2018	(3) 2019	(4) 2020
Panel A: Share of Court Departures				
Share*Post	0.0258	0.1010***	0.1749***	-0.0239
	(0.189)	(0.0113)	(0.0000)	(0.002)
DV			0.015	
Observations			1176	
R-squared			0.3136	
Panel B: Judicial Experience				
Share*Post	-0.2651	-3.2352***	-5.3654***	-5.7404***
	(2.1005)	(0.5700)	(0.6984)	(1.0979)
DV			10.7295	
Observations			1176	
R-squared			0.3668	
Panel C: Case Completion by Immigration Court				
Share*Post	-94.0833***	-165.761***	-187.6423***	-230.8595***
	(26.637)	(52.1016)	(72.4297)	(92.3309)
DV			283.6966	
Observations			1176	
R-squared			0.4852	
Panel D: Granted Cases				
Share*Post	-2.5352	-1.1699	5.9917	13.7555
	(2.0590)	(3.5421)	(5.6030)	(8.5603)
DV			26.6470	
Observations			1176	
R-squared			0.6758	
DV Mean	0.0397	0.0401	0.0425	
Observations	5,640	4,860	4,049	
Panel E: Share of Granted Cases				
Share*Post	0.0349***	0.0563***	0.0788***	0.1044***
	(0.0142)	(0.0203)	(0.0244)	(0.0341)
DV			0.1170	
Observations			1176	
R-squared			0.7478	

Notes: This table presents two-period (pre- and post-policy) Difference-in-Differences estimates derived from equation 3. Standard errors are clustered at the court level.
*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1