

From Universal to Selective: Changes in Israeli Immigration and Integration Policy 2004--2010

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Abstract

The 2004–2010 period was a time of relative stability in Israel's immigration and integration policy—a stability that traces to stability in the number of immigrants and their countries of origin, as well as the absence of a crisis in this sphere. At the end of the period, however, the orientation of immigration and absorption policy underwent a marked change: from categorical universalism, in which all immigrants are entitled to some benefits regardless of their economic status (Gal, 2008), to a selectiveness that bestows more benefits on highly skilled immigrants. Thus Israel entered the global "race for talent"—the competition for highly skilled migrants (Shachar, 2006).

This article analyzes and explains the change as a gradual transformative institutional change, a framework developed mostly by Thelen (2005, 2010) that allows scholars to analyze significant policy change at times of stability and draws on the ideational approach in institutional analysis (e.g., Béland, 2007), which helps to explain the mode and direction of a change.

Utilizing a historical institutional analysis, this article focuses on the changes in immigration and absorption policy in Israel between 2004 and 2010 and the ideas behind them. More specifically, it looks at the shifts in government responsibility for immigration and absorption in three fields: encouraging encouragement, return of émigrés, and employment. These foci were chosen due to the significant gradual transformative changes that they have undergone and their centrality in highly skilled immigration and integration policies. Along with the policy change, the analysis examines the ideas behind the policy, specifically those pertaining to the "race for talent," e.g., immigration as an economic growth strategy, preference for highly skilled migrants, self-reliance among migrants, global competition, and changing attitudes towards emigrants.

The analysis elicits three arguments. First, the incremental change in Israel's immigration and absorption policy created a transformative change: a shift in integration policy from the universal to the selective. Second, this transformative change took place through layering, i.e., the laying of new arrangements atop existing structures to serve different purposes (Streeck & Thelen, 2005). Third, the change can be explained by global ideas and policies aimed at recruiting highly skilled immigrants, viewing them as a tool for economic growth and prosperity and encouraging them to minimize their reliance on the state.

It was found that in respect of employment, the Israel Ministry of Immigrant Absorption privatized vocational training and cut its funding of immigrant employment services, transferring the responsibility for this to the migrant and expecting h/her to be self-reliant. Concurrently, highly skilled immigrants were given augmented assistance in employment. That is, employment services that once assisted all immigrants to Israel now targeted immigrants with high human capital and are perceived by the policy makers as a tool for the encouragement of immigration.

Israel's transition to a skill-focused immigration policy and its entry into the race for talent was also manifested in the expansion of MOIA's responsibilities to new spheres of immigration encouragement and much greater involvement in programs designed to bring émigrés home. This broadening of purview has been accompanied by the privatization of some immigration encouragement services and an increase in funding and assistance for highly skilled immigrants who reach Israel through governmental programs. It is these gradual changes that effected the transformation from a universal to a selective immigration and integration policy that perceives the immigrant as an economic resource that should contribute to state's growth as soon as possible and minimize its reliance on the state.

Significant evidence of the effect of ideas of the race for talent in Israel sheds light on the profound influence of global ideas on policy and politics. If Israel, which perceives itself as a haven for all Jews and sees immigration as

an ideological mission of nation-building, is influenced by the ideas of the race for talent, such is the case *a fortiori* in countries that do not see immigration as part of their ideological identity.