

Deseret News

Busting election-season myths about immigration

Sarah Anderson

August 18, 2016

Despite the heightened political rhetoric on the topic, higher rates of immigration are not tied to higher unemployment rates, according to an immigration policy analyst.

David Bier of the Cato Institute wrote in a blog post that the opposite is true — unemployment is lowest when immigration is highest. During years when immigration was greater than the historical average, unemployment averaged 5.7 percent, when in all other years unemployment was at 7.2 percent, he wrote.

Now, this doesn't mean that immigrants are lowering the unemployment rate. Economic literature has found that "immigrants cause essentially no effect on the unemployment rate one way or another," Bier noted. Instead, it points to how immigrants are attracted to the country by periods of economic growth and low unemployment rates.

"Immigrants are heralds of growth, not portents of economic disaster," Bier wrote.

But while immigrants don't affect unemployment, there is evidence that immigration marginally raises U.S. wages by making "the economic pie bigger by helping produce more, they are consumers of goods and services themselves, and their new ideas can unlock entire new industries," Quartz reported last year.

Earlier estimates that wage reductions were caused by immigration failed to realize that capital in the U.S. is not fixed, instead increasing, and that immigrants can't easily replace native workers. Quarts explained immigrants' knowledge and skills brought from outside the U.S. complement that natives' understanding of the home language and culture.

Both of these points stand in contrast to Donald's Trump's nomination acceptance speech, where he said, "decades of record immigration have produced lower wages and higher unemployment for our citizens." But his criticism of immigrant workers in his speech hasn't stopped him from hiring them in the recent past.

Of the 250 seasonal job opening posted from 2013 to 2015 for Trump Mar-a-Lago Club in Palm Beach, Florida, 246 went to foreign workers and four went to Americans, CNN noted. And Trump has been permitted by the Labor Department to hire 149 other foreign guest workers since he started his presidential campaign, Buzzfeed reported.

But Trump is not alone in his criticism of immigration policies.

The blog American Thinker, in such pieces as “President Trump: Get used to it (as some of us have)” and in a piece last month, argues that immigration should be reduced by the government “so as to allow the people already here, preferably citizens, to fill the jobs.” Many of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce members support more immigration because they “can make more money hiring immigrants who will work for less than Americans,” it continued.

And while that’s why some Republicans might support immigration, Democrats supports increased immigration because the majority of immigrants who become citizens “overwhelmingly vote Democrat,” it continued.

But the job makeup of immigrant workers may be different than assumed. Many types jobs that are stereotypically thought of as taken by immigrants, such as taxi drivers, meat drivers, construction laborers and janitors, are still mainly held by native-born Americans, according to the Center for Immigration Studies.

Of the jobs that are traditionally associated with immigrants, the center noted that:

- Janitors: 73 percent are native-born
- Porters, bellhops and concierges: 72 percent native-born
- Construction laborers: 66 percent native-born
- Grounds maintenance workers: 64 percent native-born
- Butchers and meat processors: 63 percent native-born
- Taxi drivers and chauffeurs: 58 percent native-born
- Maids and housekeepers: 51 percent native-born

And of the six jobs that are majority immigrant — including agricultural workers, stucco and plaster workers, and personal appearance workers — American citizens still make up of 46 percent of these fields, it continued.