



Data Clashes With Emotion As CPAC Immigration Panel Goes Off The Rails

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February 23, 2018

NATIONAL HARBOR, MD — The only panel dedicated to immigration at this year’s Conservative Political Action Conference quickly went off the rails Thursday, with audience members drowning out panelists’ presentation of data about the benefits of immigration with boos, laughter, and stories of “obvious illegal immigrants defecating in the woods, fornicating in the woods.”

As David Bier, a policy analyst with the libertarian Cato Institute, attempted to lay out research proving that immigrants actually have lower crime rates than native-born Americans, contribute significantly to the economy and are assimilating just as well or better than past generations of immigrants, his fellow panelists derided his statements as “nutty” and angry audience members shouted him down.

“Sweetie, you’re too young to know,” one woman called out as Bier said that the economy has historically done well during periods of high immigration to the United States.

When he noted that the U.S. proportionally takes in very few immigrants and refugees compared to other nations, a man interjected, “*You’re a dreamer!*” and much of the crowd broke out in applause and jeers.

Though this year’s CPAC fell squarely amid a legal and political battle over the fate of nearly 2 million young immigrants known as Dreamers, the issue was far from the top of the agenda at the annual gathering. The only panel dedicated to the topic was held in a small, windowless room at 5 p.m. on Thursday—after many attendees had already left for one of the conference’s many boozy receptions.

And though the panel was titled, “You May Say You’re a DREAMer But You’re Not the Only One,” it focused very little on the DREAMer population—the group of upwards of 1 million

undocumented immigrants who were brought to the U.S. as children whose legal protections were rescinded by the Trump administration last year and will expire in early March.

Instead, the event became a general airing of fears and grievances about both legal and illegal immigration. The panel's moderator, Christopher Malagisi, claimed, without evidence, a "ploy" by Democrats to offer immigrants a path to citizenship in exchange for their votes.

Rep. Michael Burgess (R-TX), who faces a primary from a Trumpian hard-right newcomer, similarly accused Democrats of putting the economic interests of young immigrants over those of young American citizens. Whenever Bier cited research to counter incorrect claims from his fellow panelists and the audience that recent immigrants are disproportionately criminal, are an economic drain on government or take several generations to learn English, he was met with vocal hostility.

During a heated question and answer session during the immigration panel, a man from Four Corners, Virginia went on an extended diatribe about a Latino man who once crashed his car in front of his house.

"I had to go down to court to testify, and I was the only white face in the crowd other than the lawyers being paid to translate for these people," he said. "You can go down to Four Corners Park and see obvious illegal immigrants defecating in the woods, fornicating in the woods, and on and on and on. These people are not the immigrants of the 20s and 30s. They will *never* be able to get good jobs here and be good citizens. Is *that* in your study?"

Struggling to be heard over the loud applause that ensued, Bier responded, "If you look at the data, the people committing crimes are overwhelmingly native-born Americans. So if you want to talk about the effect of immigrants on the crime rate, they actually *lower* the crime rate, resulting in a safer society. Obviously there are some immigrants who do commit crimes, just like there were some who committed crimes back when the Irish were the ones coming in."

"Oh, I'm Irish, don't you talk about the Irish," an older woman angrily called out.

"Guys, guys, let him respond," the moderator pleaded with the audience as the crosstalk and scoffing grew louder.

Only a small handful of people came up to Bier afterward to offer support and sympathy. Among them was Carolyn Meadows, the vice chair of the American Conservative Union, which organizes on CPAC.

"I think you're a brave young man," she said. "I really do. Thank you for coming."

Still, speaking to TPM after the panel wrapped up, Bier said he still believes in the power of facts and research to convince conservatives of the benefits of immigration.

"The data is the thing that's going to win people over," he said. "It's just about showing them that immigrants are not what they think they are and hoping that falls on receptive ears. There are people who can be convinced, people who know immigrants personally, who know they are contributing to society and they're not all defecating in the woods."

But having attended CPAC for the last six years, Bier conceded that the Republican base's attitude toward immigrants has not significantly shifted.

"I don't think it's that different [from past years]," he said. "There's always a very large contingent most passionate about immigration—about opposing it. It certainly seems like the passion is always with the side that wants to restrict it and not with the side that wants it to be more open."