

The Washington Post

Trump and immigration exclusionists undermine economic goals

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August 6, 2017

President Trump's endorsement of the immigration plan from Sens. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.) and David Perdue (R-Ga.) to slash legal immigration in half underscored the tension between the administration's nativist/xenophobic populism and its economic ambitions.

The Cotton-Perdue bill, we were gladdened to see, provoked a furious backlash not just from pro-immigration groups and liberals but from conservatives and economic growth advocates. The free-market critics, unlike Trump, comprehend that the Cotton-Perdue play to the xenophobic sentiments that lifted Trump to the presidency, if put into actual policy, would doom the goal of 3 percent growth. Put simply, you cannot slash immigration and Make America Great Again.

Much to the chagrin of the cultural nativists who see dilution of white Christian America as the end of civilization as they know it, their desire to seal America off from the world, either by trade protectionism or immigration exclusionism, would doom America to second-class status. William Frey of the Brookings Institution looked at census data and immigration patterns, concluding:

“... the annual immigration of foreign born workers and families will be an increasingly significant component of growth as the nation's population gets older and fertility remains low. It will become an especially important contributor to population growth in parts of the country that are aging rapidly and sustaining long term domestic migration declines. Immigration has long been the demographic and economic lifeblood in port-of-entry metropolises like New York, Los Angeles and Miami. The fact that, now, well over half of the nation's 100 largest metropolitan areas are receiving more of their growth from immigration than from migrants within the US dictates that communities across the country will need to prioritize accommodating new foreign born residents as an integral part of their planning for the future.”

No matter how the anti-immigration types strain to demonize immigrants and prove their threat to American workers, the facts are beyond (rational) dispute, David Bier of the Cato Institute explained:

Senator Cotton is trying to connect a slow increase in the immigration rate in recent decades to declining wages for Americans without a college degree, implying that low-skilled workers are facing more competition for jobs than in earlier years. But this correlation is spurious, because it ignores the size of the overall labor pool.

Looking at all new job seekers — born here and abroad — actually reveals a significant decline in new workers competing for American jobs. During the postwar period from 1948 to 1980, as incomes rose for all workers, the labor force grew by 76 percent, driven largely by baby boomers and women entering the labor force for the first time. Since then, declining birthrates have led to about half as many new competitors entering the labor force each year, despite many more immigrants.

The real way to diminish both illegal immigration and to accelerate growth is by increasing legal immigration:

Congress should raise the employment-based quotas, which it has not adjusted since 1990 — when the United States had some 77 million fewer people and the economy was half the size it is now. A smart reform would double green cards and peg future work visas to economic growth, responding to market forces rather than political whims.

Smart reforms, however, require that Congress first understand the basic facts: America has not seen a deluge of immigration. Low-skilled American-born workers have not faced more competition for jobs. Other countries accept more immigrants per capita. Until these facts penetrate the halls of the Capitol, the immigration debate will continue to be mired in ignorant proposals like this.

(While opposition to immigration among many conservatives may be attributable to economic illiteracy, what is the excuse for Cotton, a Harvard grad and self-proclaimed serious thinker? The answer is found in the same blinding political ambition that drives him to be the most eager cheerleader for the worst apologist for Russia and threat to the rule of law ever to occupy the White House.)

Interestingly, Americans, despite all the anti-immigration propaganda, understand that the United States needs immigrants. While not framed purely in economic terms, polling consistently shows the public understands immigrants are good for the country. The Pew Research Center recently found:

For a large majority of Americans, the country's openness to people from around the world "is essential to who we are as a nation." In a new Pew Research Center survey, 68% say America's openness to foreigners is a defining characteristic of the nation, while just 29% say "if America is too open to people from all over the world, we risk losing our identity as a nation."

The belief that openness to people from around the world is essential is widely shared across most demographic groups. However, Democrats and younger people are considerably more likely than others to hold this view, according to the national survey, conducted June 27-July 9 among 2,505 adults.

(Republicans, unsurprisingly in the age of Trump, are split with 48 percent fearing openness and 47 percent saying openness is essential.)

These figures showing widespread, overwhelming support among Americans for immigrants are consistent with a February Pew study in which “64% said an increasing number of people from different races, ethnic groups and nationalities in the U.S. made the country a better place to live, compared with 29% who said increasing diversity made no difference and 5% who said it made the U.S. a worse place to live.”

In sum, the United States has been great, prosperous and dynamic in large part because it has been open to those who want a better life for themselves and their families. That’s not merely a historical fact, it is a current reality, as we saw from a recent study that “immigrants started more than half of the current crop of U.S.-based startups valued at \$1 billion or more.” We cannot be closed and prosperous, let alone great, by clinging to the anti-immigrant hysteria whipped up by manipulative politicians.