



The GOP's Suicide Pact on Immigration

By Nick Gillespie
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Poised to take the Senate, Republicans instead want to make us all hostage to government.

As political momentum in Washington, D.C. swings toward tackling [immigration reform](#), the Republican Party once again is ready to squander a mighty electoral advantage heading into the 2014 midterms. The [general failure](#) of President Obama's economic agenda, health-care reform, civil liberties record, and foreign policy is an electoral gift. Yet with [a Senate majority](#) in plain sight, the GOP faithful is crying that "[Amnesty=Suicide](#)" and Republican leaders are calling for massively invasive new rules that will only increase the size, scope, and spending of the federal government.

And this is the party of small government? No wonder the country is so screwed.

Gone is the inclusive immigration rhetoric of Sen. Rand Paul (R-Ky.) – "[If you want to work, if you want to become an American, we welcome you.](#)" – and Rep. Justin Amash (R-Mich.) – "[People come here and they assimilate, they adapt, they go to work](#)" – replaced with [rants](#) about multi-lingual Coca-Cola ads and [the need](#) for "Border Security and Interior Enforcement" and "Employment Verification and Workplace Enforcement."

Good luck with that. Republicans insist that the federal government is too inefficient and incompetent to deliver the mail or to oversee health care, but it's nonetheless qualified to police thousands of miles of borders and run employment checks on hundreds of millions of workers? Come on guys, get your story straight.

The simple fact, one that Republicans should embrace, is that governments don't really control aggregate immigration flows any more than they control aggregate consumer demand.

Immigration is the result of far larger forces than even totalitarian governments can control, including economic opportunity in the destination country and material conditions in the home country. The Great Depression, World War II, and the reconstruction of post-war Europe ended immigration flows from Western and Southern Europe far more effectively than [racist national-origins laws](#) passed by Congress in the 1920s. Similarly, immigration between Mexico and the United States [waxes and wanes](#) depending on large macro forces that neither country's government can really dictate.

Which isn't to say that government policy has no effect on immigration. It's just that it's virtually impossible to predict or anticipate. Hence, immigration scholars say that the tightening of border security in the wake of the 1986 and 1996 immigration reforms didn't stop Mexicans from entering the U.S. as much as it keeps them from returning. "The perverse effect has been to dramatically lower return migration out of the country," Princeton's Douglas S. Massey, co-director of the Mexican Migration Project, a longitudinal survey of more than 18,000 migrants, told the San Francisco Chronicle's Carolyn Lochhead [in 2006](#). "We've transformed what was before 1986 a circular flow of workers into an increasingly settled population of families. We have actually accelerated the rate of undocumented population growth in the United States and shifted it from a less costly population of male workers into a much more costly population of families."

But don't worry, this time the feds will get everything right! Especially by creating an even-more militarized border and internal-checkpoint system to clampdown on workers who do jobs nobody else will take. And with an [E-Verify program](#) that is not only riddled with errors that will capture "real" Americans along with "fake" Americans (who nonetheless pay income, sales, and FICA taxes in large amounts) but will also transform employers into agents of a national security state. That's a great limited-government outcome, isn't it?

Rather than fixating on immigration as pressing national issue – Gallup finds that [a whopping 3 percent of Americans](#) identify "Immigration/Illegal Aliens" as "the most important problem facing this country today" – Republicans would do far better to tout the clear economic and civil-liberties benefits of expanded immigration and guest-worker policies. [The Cato Institute](#), for instance, has found that immigration reform along the lines of recent Senate proposals would add \$1.5 trillion to GDP over a decade.

As important, such reforms would allow immigration officers to cast a smaller net and spend their time weeding out criminals rather than trying to account for all workers at all times. And if the GOP is actually interested in wooing Hispanic voters and moderate independents, it would do well to emulate the attitudes and policies toward immigrants of Texas pols such as former President George W. Bush and Gov. Rick Perry, who managed to pull 40 percent or more of Latino voters in state and national elections.

As important, the GOP should use the immigration debate to address the ridiculous and relentless growth of the welfare state among good old American natives. Nobel Prize-winning economist Milton Friedman, a staunch proponent of free markets, once famously said, ["You cannot simultaneously have free immigration and a welfare state."](#) Immigration into America is far from free, of course, but at least since 1996, immigrants' access to means-tested welfare programs is

severely limited. The real problem, then, isn't with newcomers but programmatic expansion for citizens. For all the ugly talk of President Obama as "[the food-stamp president](#)," that title should properly be shared with George W. Bush. [Between 2000 and 2006](#), spending on food stamps doubled despite unemployment rates around 4 percent. When it comes [to disability claims](#), the Bush and Obama trends are also more alike than not. Unless the 21st century is somehow mangling its workers at higher rates than in the 20th, [it's clear](#) that increased disability payouts have everything to do with looser qualification standards ushered in by Bush and extended by Obama.

When it comes to yet again extending unemployment-insurance benefits – another policy begun under Bush – Republicans are on totally solid ground to say that continual extensions provide “some disincentive” to work ([so sayeth Politifact](#)). At the very least, the GOP should insist that any and all extensions be paid for by offsets elsewhere in a federal budget that approaches \$4 trillion a year.

In his masterful [Crisis and Leviathan](#), economic historian Robert Higgs writes of a “ratchet effect” by which government spending and intervention jerk up periodically and then get stuck out at heightened levels that become the new normal. In the 21st century, that's exactly what's been happening, as the country, first under Republican and then Democratic control, lurched from one crisis to another. The results – from the PATRIOT Act through Obama's stimulus plan – have led only to a government that's more intrusive in every aspect of our lives.

Most recently, in late 2008 and early 2009 – a period in which spending authority was shared by Presidents Bush and Obama – real federal outlays shot up to [around \\$10,000 per capita](#) and show no signs of coming down anytime soon. Indeed, budget deals these days seem to be little more than bi-partisan raids on proposed spending reductions such as the sequester.

If Republicans are really the party of free trade and limited government – and if they really believe in American exceptionalism and the lure of the Shining City Upon a Hill – they'll take this opportunity to welcome immigrants while rolling back the welfare state.