

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

Legalize undocumented immigrants through registry update

Sal Rodriguez
August 13, 2022

I didn't plan on writing three columns in a row on immigration, but here we are.

My first column was a rebuttal to the absurd assertions by Orange County Republican congressional candidate Scott Baugh that immigrants "dilute" the culture.

My second was an explicit defense of the notion of open borders.

Here, I focus on a much more practical and tangible idea: allowing undocumented immigrants who have lived in the United States for a period of years and who have demonstrated "good moral character" to seek lawful permanent resident status.

This isn't my idea, it's been around for a while and a bill to do just that was introduced in the House of Representatives a few weeks ago.

First, some history. In 1929, Congress passed the Registry Act which, among other things, created a process by which immigrants who lived in the country since 1921 could stay in the country. Since then, Congress has updated the date multiple times, the final time being 1986. Currently, the law permits any immigrant who has been in the country since 1972 to seek lawful permanent resident status.

The latest proposal, co-sponsored by, among others, California Democratic Reps. Norma Torres of Pomona and Lou Correa of Anaheim, would remove the fixed date and instead apply to anyone who has been in the country for seven years.

"Our country relies on immigrants, both documented and undocumented alike," said Rep. Torres, in a statement introducing the bill. "It is long past time Congress acted to recognize these critical contributions by removing barriers in our immigration system."

I can already hear some ready to bellow out, "But that's amnesty!"

Yes, it is, and it's perfectly defensible.

Last year, Pew Research Center noted that two-thirds of undocumented immigrants have lived in the United States for more than 10 years. According to the Migration Policy Institute, about 22% have been in the United States for 20 or more years.

They're already here, in our communities, living their lives and working. Many have American citizen children, even grandchildren. Many of those brought while minors have only ever known the United States as their home country.

For those who claim their objection to undocumented immigrants is that they aren't legal, well, here you go, give them a path to legalization that's not only plausible but efficient. Put them on the books. Help integrate them further into American society. It's really not that hard.

This would, incidentally, aid immigration enforcement, too, if that's your thing (it's not my thing, for the record).

“A permanent immigrant registry program would reduce the illegal immigrant population in two ways,” explained Cato Institute immigration policy expert David Bier in a 2020 policy study. “First, it would focus all enforcement resources on more recent entrants, reducing the illegal population at that end. Second, it would allow long-time residents to resolve their violations of the law, reducing the population at the other end.”

Paired with making it easier for immigrants to enter the country legally — even temporarily through expanded work programs — there you go, you take care of most of the illegal immigration problem.

The millions of people here who have been around for a long time peacefully living their lives can get on the books and fewer future immigrants who want to come to work wouldn't have to risk their lives to get here if there was a relatively easy legal path to get here.

Naturally, the bill, H.R. 8433, only has Democratic sponsors. It's also being presented right before a midterm election that's likely to turn out well for Republicans who prefer to demagogue undocumented immigrants than to legalize them, so it's one of those bills that's effectively just being thrown out there for show. Something for its sponsors to say, “See, I introduced a bill and even did a press conference. I'm basically a hero to immigrants everywhere. Vote for me!”

But that doesn't mean it isn't a good idea. It is.