

# The Washington Post

## Sanders needs to explain his voting record on immigration

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Right-wing nationalists willfully ignorant about the economic benefits of immigration will employ any argument, no matter how specious, to oppose immigration reform and decrease the number of legal immigrants at a time that acting White House chief of staff Mick Mulvaney behind closed doors confesses we are “desperate” for more immigrants to fill jobs, contribute tax revenue and fuel growth. Unfortunately, from the left, Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) has too often parroted misinformation and portrayed immigrants as a threat to American workers. To be certain, he holds none of the animus toward immigrants that President Trump and his immigration puppet master Stephen Miller do, but Sanders’s policy choices have nevertheless fallen out of sync with the mainstream in the Democratic Party and are based on economic fallacies.

Sanders, not unlike Trump, has often set up the straw man of “open borders,” claiming that more workers mean fewer or worse jobs for Americans. Vox bashed Sanders for his language in 2015:

“Open borders?” he interjected. “No, that’s a Koch brothers proposal.” The idea, he argued, is a right-wing scheme meant to flood the US with cheap labor and depress wages for native-born workers. “I think from a moral responsibility, we’ve got to work with the rest of the industrialized world to address the problems of international poverty,” he conceded, “but you don’t do that by making people in this country even poorer.”

There are two problems with Sanders’s view on this, one empirical and one moral. He’s wrong about what the effects of an open-border policy would be on American workers, and he’s wrong in treating Americans’ lives as more valuable and worthy of concern than the lives of foreigners.

Former vice president Joe Biden is correct to point out that Sanders voted against comprehensive immigration reform in 2007 that a slew of progressives in his party (from Sen. Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts to then-Sen. Barack Obama to then-Sen. Hillary Clinton) supported, in a bill that the George W. Bush administration desperately wanted to pass (back when some Republicans believed in market economics and an American creed that was blind to race and ethnicity). The bill would have legalized the status of millions of people here illegally, largely preventing the peril “dreamers” now face.

The Congressional Budget Office found that the bill “would add an estimated 1.6 million legal immigrants (or children of those immigrants) to the population by 2017. ... CBO estimates that another 1.1 million people would be added by 2017 as a result of the guest-worker program — about half of them authorized workers and dependents, the remainder the result of unauthorized overstays. That figure would grow to 2.0 million by 2027.”

At one point, Sanders commiserated with notorious anti-immigrant crank Lou Dobbs:

DOBBS: Is there any sense amongst your colleagues in the Senate, there in Washington, that it is time for people to begin to represent their constituents rather than these special interests, corporate interests ...

SANDERS: You've got it. And that's exactly the situation and of course there is concern on at least some of our parts. The reality is that I think a growing number of Americans understand that what happens in Congress is to a very significant degree dictated by big money interests.

And these guys are basing their — their whole ideology is based on greed. They're selling out American workers and in fact they're selling out our entire country and that is a major struggle that we have got to engage in to take back our country from these very powerful and wealthy special interests.

DOBBS: These special interests, and you and I have talked about this. It is now so blatant, so overt, that only those who would refuse to see could deny that both the Democratic and Republican parties are owned lock, stock and barrel by corporate America and special interests including in the amnesty legislation, socioethnic-centric interest groups who really have very little regard for the traditions of this country, the values of this country or the constituents. . . . Is there any hope that we can change that?

SANDERS: Of course there is hope that we can change that. And I think there are a growing number of Americans who understand that there's something wrong when the middle class in this country continues to shrink despite a huge increase in worker productivity, poverty continues to increase. Since Bush has been president, 5 million more Americans have slipped into poverty. Six million Americans more have lost their health insurance and the gap between the rich and everybody else is growing wider.

So when President Bush tells you how great the economy is doing, what he is really saying is that the CEOs of large multinationals are doing very, very well. He's kind of ignoring the economic reality of everybody else and that gets us to the immigration issue. . . .

DOBBS: And that H1B program, we got to watch Senator Ted Kennedy watch there with the sole witness being one Bill Gates, the world's richest man, telling him he wanted unlimited H1B visas, obviously uninformed to the fact that seven out of 10 visas under the H1B program goes to Indian corporations that are outsourcing those positions to American corporations in this country and that four out of five of those jobs that are supposed to be high-skilled jobs are actually category one jobs which is low skill.

SANDERS: Well, you raise a good point, in that this whole immigration guest worker program is the other side of the trade issue. On one hand you have large multinationals trying to shut down plants in the America, move to China and on the other hand you have the service industry bringing in low wage workers from abroad. The result is the same — middle class gets shrunken and wages go down.

This is the economic illiteracy one usually hears from Trump and the right-wing nationalists who disregard empirical evidence that we have a labor shortage, need immigrants to prevent

population shrinkage, benefit from the productivity and innovation immigrants contribute and derive tax revenue (to be used for all sorts of social welfare programs the left likes) from their work. As the Cato Institute has pointed out, the vast amount of economic literature shows “the wage effect is minuscule, concentrated on only high school dropouts, or that immigration actually increases the wages of lower-skilled Americans. . . . the wages for low-skilled American workers actually rose less slowly the last time the government cut low-skilled immigration to raise wages.”

The Post reported in 2018:

One reason immigration could have a positive effect on wages in the long run . . . is that it’s pretty clear that “immigrants are more innovative than natives; more specifically, high-skilled immigrants raise patenting per capita, which is likely to boost productivity and per capita economic growth.” High-skilled immigrants may be more likely to start businesses, hire more people and increase more demand for workers in the long run — all of which is likely to result in increased wages.

Unfortunately, in an effort to pander to unsophisticated voters, both right- and left-wing populists erect a Malthusian house of cards. They falsely assume only a set number of jobs exist. Especially at a time when we have more than 7 million unfilled jobs, are heading for an entitlement crunch and badly need to juice productivity, the populists’ economic ignorance is vastly divorced from our economic needs.

Sanders was no better on the topic when he ran for president in 2016. He still defended his 2007 vote and insisted more immigrants are bad for U.S. workers. In a Univision-Washington Post debate, Clinton zinged Sanders for two votes that took the side of anti-immigrant right-wingers. “In 2006, when Sen. Sanders was running for the Senate from Vermont, he voted in the House with hard-line Republicans for indefinite detention for undocumented immigrants, and then he sided with those Republicans to stand with vigilantes known as Minutemen who were taking up outposts along the border to hunt down immigrants,” she said.

On indefinite detention, PolitiFact found: “Sanders did vote for the bill, along with almost all Republicans and a majority of the House Democratic caucus. . . . By backing it, Sanders went against the urgings of the American Civil Liberties Union and the National Council of La Raza, a prominent Hispanic group.”

On the Minutemen, Sanders did vote for an amendment seeped in anti-immigrant paranoia that would have prevented the U.S. government “providing the Mexican government with intelligence about Minutemen patrols.” The amendment was introduced by infamous anti-immigrant Rep. Jack Kingston (R-Ga.). Sanders went along with the gimmicky provision meant to assuage vigilante groups.

In fairness to Sanders, he did vote for the 2013 immigration reform bill that passed the Senate by a 68-to-32 vote margin. The bill died in the House when then Republican Speaker John Boehner (Ohio) refused to bring it up for a vote.

Sanders has opposed Trump’s vicious anti-immigrant policies along the border and has defended a pathway to citizenship for the dreamers. However, it is also true that his record on immigration is spotty, to say the least, although his opponents have barely touched on it in this election cycle. As with so many policies, Sanders is overwhelmingly fixated on the evils of capitalism and the

greed of big business; at times that leaves him susceptible to the same economic clap-trap that motivates anti-immigrant right-wingers. At the very least, one is left wondering how much Sanders understands or cares about immigration and the necessity of increasing our pool of working-age residents.