

# The Guardian

## Why Democrats should support open borders

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Although the US Senate is holding a debate on immigration policy, the Republican leadership has already settled on an extreme position that will substantially reduce all immigration to the United States.

Senate majority leader Mitch McConnell said the debate will end this week and indicated that the Secure and Succeed Act, proposed by senators Chuck Grassley and Tom Cotton but voted down by the Senate on Thursday 39-60, was the only bill that could pass the House and be signed by the president. Senator Cotton said on Tuesday that it was a non-negotiable “best and final offer”. In the face of this recalcitrance, the Democrats must rethink their current incoherent immigration policy and argue robustly for more open borders.

The Republican plan would have allocated \$25bn for border security, ended the diversity visa, and substantially restricted family reunification visas in exchange for a 12-year path for citizenship, including “good moral character checks”, for the 1.8 million people who were qualified for the Daca program. Overall, the plan would reduce legal immigration to the US by 35%, or more than 350,000 people per year mostly from Latin America, Asia and Africa.

It is logical to support immigration restrictions if you believe that the United States is fundamentally an Anglo-European culture with western civilizational roots. This logic drove the United States’ earliest immigration laws from the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 to the Immigration Act of 1924 that established quotas to protect a racially defined notion of who could enter the United States. Subsequent immigration laws removed the explicitly racist elements, but have continued to limit the number of immigrants, the vast majority of whom are not white.

The core of the Democratic position on immigration is harder to discern. Democrats are in favor of some border security, but definitely not a wall. Democrats favor some immigrants such as Dreamers, but accept the status quo that restricts immigration from most of the planet. Since the Republicans have come clean on their desire to reduce legal immigration, Democrats should formulate a forceful pro-immigration argument in favor of open borders.

Despite the vocal anti-immigration sentiment on the right, opinion surveys suggest most Americans support more immigration. A 2018 Quinnipiac poll found 65% of Americans oppose

building more border walls and a 2017 Pew survey found that 63% believe immigrants “strengthen the country”. For Democrats, it is 84%.

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Open borders could have an enormous positive impact on GDP worldwide. Even critics of immigration, such as George Borjas, acknowledge this: “The removal of immigration restrictions would indeed lead to a huge increase in GDP: global wealth would increase by \$40tn – almost a 60% rise. Moreover, the gain would accrue *each year* after the restrictions were removed.” Given the clear economic benefit, the conservative Wall Street Journal ran an editorial in 1984 arguing for a five word amendment to the US constitution: “There shall be open borders.”

The concern that some citizens might lose jobs to immigrants is not supported by research. One study found migrant and native workers are employed in different sectors of the economy, another showed that migrants create 1.2 additional jobs beyond the job they do because they rent an apartment, buy a car, and frequent local businesses.

Nancy Pelosi, the Democratic leader in the House, speaks to the media after giving an eight-hour speech on immigration. Photograph: Alex Wong/Getty Images

The claim that immigrants commit more crime is also false. One study found that 3% of migrants without a college degree are in jail, compared to 11% of the native population. The Cato Institute calculated that the odds of being killed in a terrorist attack carried out by an immigrant are extremely low, 1 in 723 million.

How many people would actually move if borders were open? A 2011 Gallop survey found that 14% of the world population would like to move to another country, with perhaps 100 million wanting to go to the US. These numbers may alarm some, but these movements would happen over years, or even decades.

Furthermore, they are less than the rate of population growth in the United States in the late 19th century through migration. Thirty million people from Europe arrived in the United States between 1815 and 1915. At the beginning of that era, in 1815, the US population was only 8.5 million.

Finally, there is not a moral or ethical reason to justify restricting the movement of other human beings at borders. Border controls harm other people by limiting their opportunities and by causing many to die when they do try to move. In 2016, more than 7,800 people died simply trying to move from one place to another. Today, Donald Trump and his supporters see migrants as the barbarians at the gate. However, future generations may look back on our era and see the people violently manning the gates as the true barbarians.

The Republican position on immigration is coherent, but racist. The Democrats should reject the bill and argue for the politically popular, economically sound, and morally right position: open borders.