



America will be stronger with our immigration policy based on facts

Mark McLarty and Jack Watson

May 16, 2018

The immigration debate in this country has divided the nation and paralyzed Congress for decades, never more so than in the last two years. Yet, last week we saw a small glimmer of hope. A group of moderate lawmakers signed a “discharge petition,” in an attempt to bring legislation protecting Dreamers, to the floor of the House.

We do not mean to overstate the chances of success in this maneuver, especially since Speaker Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) has opposed it. But it is the latest reminder that Americans expect something better than the demagoguery that has recently defined our debate on this issue. Democrats, Republicans and independents may not agree on every aspect of immigration policy, but we are all better off when that policy is driven by consensus and informed by common sense. With that in mind, we should pause and consider the facts.

First, we are frequently warned that immigrants lack the skills to contribute to American society, but this is simply not the case. In 2013, 29 percent of all research doctorates in science, engineering and health — including an astonishing 48 percent of those with a Ph.D. in computer science and mathematics — were awarded to immigrants. Over the last 17 years, 78 Nobel Prizes were awarded to Americans in chemistry, medicine and physics. Thirty-one of those Nobel laureates, or 40 percent, were immigrants.

These achievements are not merely a matter of academic prestige. They also contribute to our economy as a whole. An astonishing 43 percent of Fortune 500 companies were founded or cofounded by first-generation or second-generation immigrants. The National Academy of Sciences estimates that the average immigrant contributes at least \$92,000 more in taxes than he or she receives in benefits over a lifetime.

Second, we are often told immigration leads to violent crime, but this claim is refuted by evidence. A Cato Institute study in 2017 found that the incarceration rate of immigrants, including unauthorized immigrants, is actually less than that of native-born Americans. Overall crime rates are lower in areas where immigrants live.

Third, we are regularly warned that “floods” of unauthorized immigrants are surging across the southern border to steal the jobs of American citizens. Once again, the facts belie that assertion. According to a 2014 study, the 11 million people who entered the United States illegally currently account for only 5 percent of our workforce.

In the wake of the 2008 economic crisis, we were told that deporting unauthorized immigrants would help American citizens find jobs. But while mass deportations thankfully never occurred, the unemployment rate is currently 3.9 percent. In other words, the idea that unauthorized immigrants were responsible for high unemployment was tested, and found to be entirely incorrect.

Moreover, there is no “tsunami” of immigrants crossing our southern border. Since June 2008, more Mexicans have left the U.S. to return to Mexico than have come to the United States. Meanwhile, for all the talk of stopping illegal border crossings, 42 percent of the approximately 11 million unauthorized immigrants living in the United States arrived here legally, but overstayed their visas to remain.

If we approach the immigration debate using facts, rather than partisan politics or ideology, it becomes clear that the current administration’s immigration policy would do far more harm than good. Yes, secure borders are important to the safety and well-being of a nation. Yet the wall the president insists on building would have little, if any, practical effect on immigration rates and cost taxpayers at least \$25 billion dollars. It is hard to justify spending such a massive sum – at a time of wildly expanding deficits – on what would be little more than a political symbol.

It is similarly hard to fathom why the president’s current immigration proposal calls for cuts in *legal* immigration approaching 50 percent. Joel Prakken, Co-Founder of Macroeconomic Advisers, estimates that such a cut would have a drastic impact on our economy, reducing the rate of U.S. economic growth by about 12.5 percent from currently projected levels. The Cato Institute has pointed out that slashing legal immigration in half is particularly unwise at a time when the average age of the U.S. population is steadily increasing, and we need younger workers to maintain our economic growth.

At the heart of immigration restrictionists’ proposals is the idea that American life is a zero-sum game – that in order for one person to succeed in this country, another must fail. But our history suggests otherwise. The story of America is not the story of a fierce competition for a limited pool of resources – rather, it is a story of steadily growing wealth and opportunity that ultimately benefits us all.

That heritage is part of what makes America the greatest country on Earth – and it’s a legacy we should extend for future generations. We do not expect every lawmaker, citizen, or president to agree on all the details of America’s immigration policy. But as we were reminded again last

week, some common ground remains. Moving forward, if we can approach the challenges of immigration policy with a renewed appreciation for the value of facts, our areas of consensus will be far greater than they currently appear.