

NATIONAL REVIEW

No, the GOP Isn't Trying to Bar 'Immigrant Grandparents' from the U.S.

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Over at the *New York Times* [op-ed page](#), Stacy Torres and Xuemei Cao warn that if President Trump and his allies succeed in their efforts to limit family sponsored immigration, the results will be disastrous. Specifically, they focus on a Trump-backed bill under which adult U.S. citizens would lose the right to sponsor their parents for green cards. According to Torres and Cao, this would be a very bad thing for countless immigrant families, as these families need immigrant grandparents to serve as family caregivers.

“Older parents serve as valuable resources, often helping with the down payment on homes and with child care and household chores as younger immigrants juggle tight work schedules,” they write. “Their assistance is free and reliable, allowing adult children to work, improve their English and further their educations, thus integrating faster into American society.”

I want to address the merits of Torres and Cao's argument. Before I get there, though, it is important to note that Torres and Cao offer an extremely misleading characterization of the actual policy proposal in question. It is so misleading, in fact, that it vitiates the substance of their argument. Consider the following excerpt:

In June the House defeated a plan by Bob Goodlatte, the Republican Congressman from Virginia, that would have restricted legal immigration through the family reunification program so that only the spouses and minor children of American citizens could immigrate — barring grandparents. A week later, the so-called compromise GOP bill on immigration was also defeated. It would have effectively cut the sponsorships of spouses, minor children and parents of American citizens by about 215,000 over the next two decades, according to [analysts at the Cato Institute](#). But Republicans haven't given up.

The plan Torres and Cao are referring to is the “Securing America's Future Act of 2018,” the [detail](#) of which can be found on the website of the House Judiciary Committee. The clear

implication of their op-ed is that under the Goodlatte bill, immigrant grandparents would be barred from the country. In fact, the legislation does not bar immigrant grandparents, or more precisely the parents of U.S. citizens (who, of course, may or many not have children of their own), from the country. Rather, it modifies and narrows the definition of who counts as an *immediate* relative. Whereas current U.S. immigration law holds that the spouses and unmarried minor children of U.S. citizens and the parents of adult citizens all count as immediate relatives, and are thus exempt from the numerical limits that apply to most other applicants for green cards, the Goodlatte bill limits immediate relative status to the spouses and unmarried minor children of U.S. citizens.

Does this mean that the parents of U.S. citizens are barred from the country under the Goodlatte bill, as Torres and Cao would have it? Not at all. The bill creates a new non-immigrant visa category (the “W” visa) for the parents of U.S. citizens, which would allow them to reside in the U.S. for an initial period of five years that could be renewed ad infinitum. If you’re a U.S. citizen who wants your parents to live with you and your family, you’d be very welcome to apply for a W visa. The Canadian government has a similar policy in place, and it seems to work quite well.

There is a catch, however. Though parents holding W visas would have the right to live in the U.S., they would not have the right to take part in paid employment, nor would they be eligible for federal, state, or local transfer programs. To secure a W visa for their parents, U.S. citizens would have to demonstrate that they are capable of supporting their parents, including paying for their health-insurance coverage.

With that in mind, let’s revisit Torres and Cao’s substantive argument. They tout the fact that immigrant grandparents offer assistance that is “free and reliable” — that is, they offer assistance that is unpaid. The W visa would do nothing to prevent immigrant grandparents from offering such support. The only difference is that whereas the parents of adult U.S. citizens who’ve secured green cards might eventually become eligible for public assistance, and would immediately have the right to secure paid employment, the W visa doesn’t grant them the right to engage in paid work, and it requires the citizens who sponsor their adult parents to finance adequate health-insurance coverage for them.

Torres and Cao could have made different arguments that take into account the W-visa provision. For example, they could have argued that we must preserve the status quo so that immigrant grandparents can perform paid labor so they can help supplement the incomes of their offspring. (Granted, this is a less affecting argument than talk of loving immigrant grandparents, and it raises the question of why our immigration system is leaving us with naturalized citizens who are so desperately poor that they need to put their aged parents to work to keep a roof over their heads.) Or they could have explicitly said that the U.S. ought to allow U.S. citizens to sponsor their parents and then expect other taxpayers to provide for their basic needs as they grow older and, regrettably, sicker. But they did not. Rather, they made arguments such as the following:

Immigrant elders also help transplanted families maintain a sense of continuity. They may serve as cultural intermediaries by teaching grandchildren about their home country’s language,

religion, food and cultural traditions. Their accounts of family histories can serve as a source of ethnic pride and personal empowerment for younger generations searching for their identities as racial and ethnic minorities.

Yet parents who arrive in the country under W visas wouldn't be prevented from helping transplanted families maintain a sense of community, or from serving as cultural intermediaries. They'd be perfectly free to serve as a source of ethnic pride, personal empowerment, recipes from the old country, and much else besides. The only things they wouldn't be able to do are seek paid employment and rely on safety-net benefits financed by the American public at large.

How is it that Torres and Cao overlooked the W visa? My sense is that the news coverage of the Goodlatte bill was mostly perfunctory, and that while there were stray mentions of the W visa in the press, they were few and far between. This, I suspect, reflects the work of less-than-scrupulous think-tank scholars who deliberately oversimplified the bill's provisions to achieve maximum polemical effect. Though it is possible that Torres and Cao are being deliberately misleading, I doubt it. It is more likely that they were ill-served by the people they trusted to accurately describe the Goodlatte bill. And if so, they weren't alone.

On a tangential note, Torres and Cao observe, correctly, that the parents of U.S. citizens represent a rising share of permanent admissions, having gone from 7 percent of the total in 1994 to 15 percent in 2016. Note that this runs counter to the oft-heard argument that U.S. immigration policies are a valuable way to counteract the aging of the U.S. population. Adopting a renewable non-immigrant W visa for the parents of adult U.S. citizens is one way to ensure that *permanent* visas go to younger people who have many years of work ahead of them, not older people who do not, and indeed who will soon be in need of expensive, labor-intensive care.

For an intelligent, rigorous, and balanced discussion of the issue, I recommend the work of Princeton sociologist Marta Tienda, who wrote a short piece on the subject for the *Times* back in 2013. Tienda observed that "family reunification policies adopted in the 1960s are exacerbating the graying of the U.S. population, which will put even more financial pressure on programs like Medicare and Medicaid and raise health care costs for everyone," and Torres and Cao's op-ed did nothing to dispel this concern.