

The Daily Targum

MAENNER: Immigration based on merit is short-sighted

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While it would be prudent for President Donald J. Trump to proclaim that the state of our union is “strong” when he faces the nation for his 2018 State of the Union Address, behind the scenes there is no clearer evidence for the division that has been sewn throughout this country than the immigration debate. But while the debate that surrounded last week’s short-lived government shutdown about the future of former President Barack Obama-era’s Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program was centered around Republicans and Democrats, the more interesting divide on the immigration debate exists solely within the Republican Party, with the ethnic concerns of hardline nationalists clashing with the business interests of the establishment right.

Currently, the immigration debate on the right is focused on two main issues: the first is what to do with DACA recipients and the other is a broader discussion about how to implement meritocratic reform. Though Republicans would like to treat these two issues separately, the truth is that in the context of the immigration debate both issues are one and the same. While it may be popular Republican orthodoxy to support a “merit-based” immigration system like that of Canada, what it fails to take into account is that the current immigration system in the United States is quite meritocratic in its own right. In fact, because the “line” for legal immigration stretches all the way back to people who applied in the 1990s, the more viable approach for entry into the United States has been through the visa program, which allows for skilled foreign workers to live in the country legally while working, and for international students to attend American universities in order to achieve a higher education.

But the most shocking aspect of the immigration debate on the right has been the focus by Republicans to correct the problems they see within the American immigration system through government intervention, while completely ignoring the great strides that have been made over the last few decades in attracting more educated immigrants to the country. Research done by the conservative Cato Institute bears this out: finding that from 1993 to 2015, “the share of admitted immigrants who have at least a college education increased from 22 to 39 percent.” The Migration Policy Institute also found that “the number of immigrants with higher education has grown at more than twice the rate of the same population among the U.S. born” between 1990 and 2014. While government legislation has played a part in catalyzing this marked shift in immigration, the biggest factor has been none other than the supply and demand nature of the United States economy. With the need for highly skilled and educated workers at an all-time

high, it has been the economic forces of the free market that have done more to reform the input of the American immigration system than any legislation could have.

Though Republicans have long claimed to be the party of small government and allowing the market to correct itself, it seems those ideals have been forgotten in the confines of the U.S. immigration debate. While DACA has been very popular with the business world, many Republicans do not seem phased with the fact that allowing DACA to end could cost the economy upward of "\$200 billion." In attempting to draw a compromise with Democrats and his fellow Republicans, Trump has offered a pathway to citizenship for DACA recipients, albeit with drastic cuts to legal immigration due to the false notion that the current immigration system is not in any way, shape or form "merit-based." But, those on the far-right seemingly have no interest in following the advice of business leaders, with prominent Republicans such as Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) stating that he will not support Dreamer citizenship, because of the fact that it is "inconsistent with the promises we made to the men and women who elected us."

This divide among conservatives on immigration reform has captured Trump in a political catch-22, where no possible reform bill will please everyone involved. This leaves the president to have to choose between the bipartisan consensus that currently exists across the aisle or to stick with the anti-immigrant forces to which he owes his rise to. The quest for a merit-based immigration system is nothing new in American politics, as former President Lyndon B. Johnson once aspired to implement such a system, though he was quelled in his attempt by southern Democrats who feared that it would change the country's "demographic profile." While many Republicans today may share in the president's belief that a merit-based system will attract more immigrants from places that can preserve the United States' demographic profile like Norway, the truth is that the effects of any merit-based immigration plan are currently being seen today.