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Fernando Espuelas

In Republican Debates, Ideology Trumps Intelligent Immigration Policy

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Living in Los Angeles I drive by multi-car pile-ups on the freeway at least once a week. An occurrence so common that it no longer shocks or surprises. Yet it is impossible to take your eyes off the wreckage.

Similarly, you'd think that when the Republican presidential candidates debate each other I would simply look away, turn the volume down on the TV, and wait until the obligatory segment on immigration "policy" is over. Really, how many ideological wrecks posing as "solutions" to America's immigration crisis can one listen to?

And yet, the second South Carolina GOP debate sure felt like rush hour on the 405 Freeway, America's biggest bumper-car ride. Rick Santorum, recently [endorsed by a group of prominent Evangelical Christians](#), was joined by establishment favorite Mitt Romney in bashing Newt Gingrich's proposals on immigration.

The former Speaker's rather modest immigration proposal - to allow people who have been in the U.S. at least 25 years to apply to a "World War II-style Draft Board" made up of local citizens who will then decide whether to deport or allow these people to stay with their families - was forcefully rejected during the debate by Gingrich's competitors.

In a deliberate attempt to satisfy the anti-immigrant wing of the GOP, Santorum and Romney expressed positions on immigration so radical, so destructive to the American economy, our historical heritage and to our collective sense of decency, that the car wreck metaphor truly took hold.

Both Santorum, the son of Italian immigrants, and Mexican-American Romney bid for the title of Most Divisive onstage. While both men speak constantly about their Christian faith and the centrality of family to their core beliefs, their approach to immigration is much closer to ethnic cleansing than an actual immigration policy that strengthens America.

In short, the former Senator from Pennsylvania and the ex-Governor of Massachusetts are advocating mass deportations - 11 million people sent back "home." To be clear, Gingrich's supposedly more "[humane](#)" approach would result, as the Speaker said during the debate, in "most of them go[ing] home." The "them" in this instance are undocumented immigrants who have been in the U.S. fewer than 25 years.

Putting aside for the moment the horrendous human and moral costs of deporting 11 million people (a number of people comparable to the whole population of [Belgium](#)), tearing families and communities apart in the process, this is simply bad economic policy.

Daniel Griswold, a senior scholar at the Cato Institute, has documented the self-defeating nature of the GOP's harsh enforcement approach to immigration. Recently [writing in the National Review](#), Griswold stated that "Study after study confirms that immigrants help to boost the productivity and incomes of native-born Americans. A 2009 Cato Institute study by Peter Dixon and Maureen Rimmer calculated that legalizing low-skilled immigration would boost the collective income of U.S. households by \$180 billion per year."

Moreover, beyond the hit to economic growth that mass deportations would cause, there is the actual cost of a deportation policy. In 2010, the Center for American Progress undertook [a comprehensive study](#) of the financial impact of the deportation approach advocated by Santorum and Romney.

According to the study's authors, "the total five-year immigration enforcement cost under a mass deportation strategy would be approximately \$285 billion." These are direct costs to tax payers - it does not include the loss in economic activity represented by

immigrant labor and consumption, taxes paid by immigrants and the decreased productivity across the U.S. economy as workers basically disappear.

For the GOP hopefuls now battling it out in South Carolina, it is clear that taking a hard-line on undocumented people is good politics. But beyond the hypocrisy of parading your Christian bona fides while advocating the breaking up of millions of families, these supposed saviors of the American economy seem to be completely disconnected from the real-world impact of their policy positions.

At a time when America is trying to bring its budget into balance, keep our military the preeminent fighting force in the world, and rebuild our transportation and education infrastructure to effectively compete in the 21st century, the Romney-Santorum mass deportation approach to immigration policy is, to paraphrase New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, a form of "[national suicide](#)." As last week's "pile-up" showed, it's time to reveal the candidates' proposed solutions for the wrecks they truly are.