

Trump Is Headed for Another Failure with a Deplorable Immigration Bill

Rob Garver

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Back when his presidential candidacy was still a longshot, Donald Trump had a go-to method for firing up his supporters if he sensed that a campaign rally was losing its momentum. He described it in an interview with *The New York Times* editorial board: “You know, if it gets a little boring, if I see people starting to sort of, maybe thinking about leaving, I can sort of tell the audience, I just say, ‘We will build the wall!’ and they go nuts.”

The “wall,” of course, is the thousand-mile-long barrier Trump has promised to build along the border with Mexico while getting the Mexican government to pay for it. And Trump knew how effective it was as a motivator for his base of support, which was, and still is, made up largely of older, white Americans. The promise to keep illegal immigrants from Central and South America from coming into the United States was always a powerful motivator for Trump’s those voters. Just like his vow to ban Muslims from some countries entering the U.S., and his other vows to crack down on immigration.

So, given the turmoil engulfing the Trump White House over the past few weeks, with multiple resignations and firings of top administration staff, the failure of the Affordable Care Act repeal effort, and a successful effort by Congress to strong-arm Trump into signing sanctions against Russia, it’s no wonder that the president returned to his comfort zone on Wednesday.

In an appearance at the White House, flanked by Arkansas Sen. Tom Cotton and Georgia Sen. David Perdue, Trump threw his support behind the RAISE Act, a bill designed to slash the number of legal immigrants allowed into the United States each year by half and to impose a strict “points” system that would give preference to financially independent, English speaking applicants. It would also sharply restrict the kind of relatives that US citizens and legal permanent residents would be able to sponsor. The number of refugees accepted each year would be capped at 50,000, a figure much lower than in the final years of the Obama administration.

Trump and the two senators backing the bill touted the measure as one that would safeguard jobs for Americans -- jobs that they claim are being taken away by immigrants who are also simultaneously driving down wages.

“For decades, the U.S. has operated a very low-skilled immigration system,” Trump said. “It has not been fair to our people, to our citizens, to our workers.”

The implication, later hammered home by Trump aide Stephen Miller in a contentious briefing with the White House press corps, was that by slashing the number of immigrants allowed into the country, the plan would drive up wages for the US-born workers who remain.

It is, as Miller put it in one heated exchange, simply “common sense.”

However, the bill would not only restrict immigration by low-skilled workers. It would also reduce the number of highly-trained workers seeking to come to the US but who might not be able to check all the boxes enumerated by the plan -- or who might simply fall on the wrong side of an arbitrary quota.

Despite the air of certainty from the podium at the White House on Wednesday, economists from across the ideological spectrum were practically standing in line to dispute the idea that the plan would benefit the American economy.

James Pethokoukis, an economist with the conservative American Enterprise Institute, argued that the plan being pushed by the White House goes in exactly the wrong direction, particularly at a time when “a demographic-driven slowdown in US labor force growth means real GDP growth is likely to be slower in the future than in the past.”

“How about a bill to sharply boost overall immigration with an emphasis on attracting many, many more immigrant scientists and entrepreneurs?” he suggested.

At the Cato Institute, economist and immigration policy expert Alex Nowrasteh claimed that the bill wouldn’t even do what its authors promise.

“The Cotton-Perdue bill would not create a skills-based immigration system as President Trump has said he wants, it will not increase American wages, and it is not a credible bargaining chip in any future negotiations in Congress,” he wrote.

“Interestingly, the current U.S. immigration system is gradually selecting a higher proportion of skilled immigrants over time without Congressional reform. The Cotton-Perdue bill deserves to be criticized, but it is not a serious threat that should gain concessions from Congressmen or Senators in both parties who either support immigration reform or the current level of admissions.”

The criticisms echoed those of a group of nearly 1,500 economists who earlier this year signed a joint letter criticizing President Trump’s anti-immigration rhetoric and policies.

“Immigration undoubtedly has economic costs as well, particularly for Americans in certain industries and Americans with lower levels of educational attainment,” they wrote. “But the benefits that immigration brings to society far outweigh their costs, and smart immigration policy could better maximize the benefits of immigration while reducing the costs.”

These criticisms are neither new nor difficult to unearth. A broad spectrum of economic thinkers has consistently debunked assertions, like those enshrined in the RAISE Act, that slashing legal immigration is the key to higher wages for Americans.

So, that raises a question. Is the president's decision to suddenly embrace the Cotton-Perdue proposal at a time when his support is flagging, and scandal is closing in from all sides a well-considered policy action? Or is it just an updated version of Trump trying to stir up his supporters by shouting "We will build the wall!"