Slate

An Immigration Marriage Made in Hell

Libertarians and liberals have forged a strange pro-immigration alliance. It's going to end poorly.

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Tax-cutting, government-shrinking, regulating-shredding immigration enthusiasts such as Alex Nowrasteh, a researcher at the Cato Institute, are all for opening America's borders if immigrants and their families are denied access to safety-net benefits such as Medicaid and SNAP. "Well, we absolutely shouldn't be paying welfare benefits," Nowrasteh said on a <u>recent appearance on</u> <u>Fox News' *Tucker Carlson Tonight*</u>. "I don't want to pay welfare benefits to anybody. And we definitely shouldn't be paying them to immigrants, illegal or otherwise."

Immigration advocates on the left, in contrast, believe that mass less-skilled immigration can benefit the country if taxpayers provide immigrants and their children with the government support they need to lead dignified lives. That's why they champion causes like providing unauthorized immigrants with <u>subsidized medical care</u> and <u>generous wage subsidies</u> and expanding access to <u>early education programs</u> for the children of poor immigrants who start life at a serious disadvantage relative to their better-off peers. To the pro-immigration left, support for high immigration levels goes hand in hand with support for other egalitarian causes, like a cradle-to-grave welfare state and generous foreign aid.

For years, libertarian activists have provided much of the intellectual firepower for the pro-immigration cause. The pro-immigration left routinely parrots arguments originally made by libertarians who quite literally want to eliminate the welfare state, and many pro-immigration liberals in Congress have signed on to legislation that would go dangerously far in this direction. But ultimately, the pro-immigration right and the pro-immigration left have goals that are utterly incompatible. This is a strange sort of bipartisanship. It's as though immigration advocates on one side of the ideological divide believe that they can fleece advocates on the other: *I think you're a useful idiot, and you feel the same way about me, so let's join forces!* In the long run, though, one side or the other is going to be proven wrong. For the sake of our nation, I hope it's the libertarians who lose this argument. As much as I might disagree with the liberals on the wisdom of increasing less-skilled immigration, they at least appreciate that zeroing out the safety

net would be a humanitarian disaster for the millions of poor immigrant families who live among us.

The contradictions at the heart of the pro-immigration coalition are all very amusing until you realize the extent to which immigrants depend on the welfare state. As of 2010, the per-person median household income of immigrants was $13,961, about one-third lower than the $20,795 per-person median household income of natives. To a well-off person, this income gap might not sound like a yawning chasm. But it can mean the difference between being poor enough to qualify for food stamps or not.

In a comprehensive report on the economic and fiscal impact of immigration, the National Academy of Sciences found that 45.3 percent of immigrant-headed households with children relied on food assistance as compared to 30.6 percent of native-headed households with children. Taking food assistance away from these families wouldn't just mildly inconvenience them. One influential study by economists Hilary Hoynes of UC–Berkeley, Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach of Northwestern University, and Douglas Almond of Columbia University found that access to food stamps has long-lasting effects on the well-being of children raised in low-income households, including significant reductions in obesity, high blood pressure, and diabetes—serious chronic illnesses that can reduce earning potential and generate significant medical costs.

We already limit the extent to which legal immigrants can access the safety net. In his Fox News appearance, Nowrasteh correctly observed that legal immigrants are barred from accessing safety-net benefits for their first five years in the country. There are a number of exemptions from this five-year waiting period, however, and it doesn't apply at all to humanitarian immigrants, who represent about 15 percent of all legal immigrants.

But the waiting period is having an impact all the same. Arloc Sherman and Danilo Trisi of the left-of-center Center on Budget and Policy Priorities have observed that the five-year waiting period has contributed to a sharp rise in food insecurity and deep poverty rates for noncitizens and children living with noncitizen parents. That's despite the fact that only about one-sixth of legal immigrants have been in the country for five years or less. If you believe that these programs really do help people, as Sherman and Trisi do, it stands to reason that if *all* legal immigrants were barred from access to safety-net benefits, the consequences would be far worse. So it's worth noting that in a 2013 paper, Nowrasteh and Sophie Cole—leading thinkers on the pro-immigration right—explicitly call for doing just that, an approach they refer to as "building a wall around the welfare state."

What would be the likely result of "building a wall around the welfare state"? For one thing, large numbers of noncitizens would naturalize. The sociologists Douglas Massey and Karen Pren have observed that in the wake of the 1996 welfare reform's limits on noncitizens' access to safety-net benefits, many immigrants embraced "defensive naturalization" to ensure they would continue to receive public assistance—a perfectly sensible thing for poor immigrants to do. Nowrasteh and Cole acknowledge this likelihood, which is why they conclude on the following note: "Instead of trying in vain to halt immigration, we should turn our energy toward reforming welfare, making it less accessible to all, eliminating it altogether, or lowering the benefit levels."

Judging by Nowrasteh's remarks on Fox News ("I don't want to pay welfare benefits to anybody"), eliminating safety-net benefits altogether is his preferred option.

How is it that liberals wound up making common cause with libertarians who want to shrink the welfare state until it's small enough to drown in a bathtub? There's a simple explanation. Comprehensive immigration reform—increasing immigration levels and granting unauthorized immigrants a path to citizenship—is the mother of all bipartisan causes. Presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama both favored it, and a comprehensive immigration reform bill (the "gang of eight" bill) came extremely close to getting signed into law in 2013. While most of the great and the good in both parties see comprehensive immigration reform as the only sensible way forward, forging this bipartisan alliance hasn't always been easy. To get Republican lawmakers on board, they had to be convinced that the gang of eight bill wouldn't lead newly legalized immigrants to start accessing the safety net. That's where the libertarians came in.

Among immigration wonks, there is an ongoing debate about how to think about the net fiscal impact of immigration. That is, when we sum up all the taxes that immigrants pay and then sum up the cost of the various benefits they receive, is the number we're left with positive or negative? The aforementioned National Academy of Sciences report concluded that highly educated immigrants will on average pay much more in taxes than they'll receive in services while the least-educated immigrants tend to receive more in services than they pay in taxes. Much depends on the assumptions we make about how generous we will be going forward to the poorest of the poor.

As a general rule, restrictionists want to raise the average skill level of future immigration flows, to ensure that high-income immigrants greatly outnumber low-income immigrants. Pro-immigration liberals are less interested in improving the net fiscal impact of immigration because they understand that the whole point of income redistribution is to transfer resources from the rich to the poor, which by definition means making the net fiscal impact of low-income immigrants "worse." The more you cut taxes on poor immigrants, the more you provide them with high-quality medical care and education regardless of their ability to pay, the more dollars you'll wind up transferring to them on a net basis. That is the price thoughtful liberals are willing to pay to achieve what is essentially a humanitarian goal. Libertarians split the baby in a different way: They seek to improve the net fiscal impact of immigration by slashing the services available to low-income immigrants and by making the tax burden less progressive. Problem solved!

Which leads us back to comprehensive immigration reform. The gang of eight bill granted unauthorized immigrants who met certain requirements "registered provisional immigrant" status. Influenced by libertarian thinkers, the bill's architects barred RPIs from accessing federal means-tested programs, including Medicaid and SNAP. RPI status would last for a decade, at which point RPIs could apply to become lawful permanent residents. Then they'd have to wait another several years to access safety-net benefits. Altogether, unauthorized immigrants legalized under the gang of eight bill would have had to wait *13 to 15 years* before they could rely on programs designed to help poor people stay healthy.

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Wouldn't unauthorized immigrants be better off as RPIs, even if they were denied access to safety-net benefits, than if they were subject to deportation, as they are now? It's a fair point. If cutting a deal with people who want to dismantle the welfare state had been the only way for liberals to shield long-settled unauthorized immigrants from deportation, that might be a deal worth taking. But I'm not sure that's the best deal on table.

Mark Krikorian, head of the staunchly restrictionist Center for Immigration Studies, has argued for an immigration compromise that would couple an amnesty for long-established unauthorized immigrants with lower immigration levels. Even Donald Trump has hinted that he sees stepped-up enforcement as a prelude to some kind of amnesty. Liberals who want an immigration amnesty, then, have a choice of allies. They can join forces with libertarians who want to strip immigrants, and eventually everyone, of access to the safety net. Or they can work with restrictionists who are willing to accept an amnesty and to keep the safety net intact in exchange for a reduction in future less-skilled immigration.

If we're going to have an amnesty of some kind, whether now or in the medium-term future, we need to face the fact that most unauthorized immigrants live in households with low market incomes. That's not because unauthorized immigrants are lazy—nothing could be further from the truth. Rather, it's because demand for less-skilled labor in general has been falling, and more than half of unauthorized immigrant adults have less than a high school education. In a 2013 profile of the unauthorized immigrant population, researchers at the Migration Policy Institute found that the vast majority of unauthorized immigrants lived in households with incomes that would qualify them for some form of public assistance. Does it really make sense to deny these people food stamps—especially when they're our neighbors and when many of them will likely become our fellow citizens?

I can understand and appreciate thoughtful liberals who want America to serve as a refuge for people in need, even if that means that we might have to make sacrifices to better their lives. My own belief is that we should invest the resources necessary to help today's low-income immigrants and their children become full participants in American society before admitting many more. What I can't abide are those who speak of "welcoming" desperately poor people into our country while calling for the destruction of the safety net. That's a solution that will create more problems than it solves and cause irreparable harm to some of America's most vulnerable people.