



Advocate fights for open immigration

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Alex Nowrasteh was first attracted to the immigration debate out of intellectual curiosity — and then because he thought it would be a good career choice.

“I thought it was going to be a big deal in the future,” said Nowrasteh, a senior immigration policy specialist at the libertarian Cato Institute, who started focusing on immigration in 2007. “My background is in economics, and so I realized that immigration touches on every aspect of social science.”

Nowrasteh said he came to care about immigration as a defining factor of American democracy from a perspective opposite to that of many who are now his allies on the issue.

“After I’d been working in it for a while, I realized how important it is for Americans, for the future of our country, but also for the immigrants and their descendants and people in other countries who aspire to our standard of living and to our values,” he told The Hill in a recent interview.

And Nowrasteh said he soon learned why so many people who specialize on the topic take it so personally.

“I’m not sure when that happened or exactly how that happened. But part of it, I think, it’s where I express sort of my nationalism and patriotism,” he said.

In a debate that’s fired up both the right and the left, spurred on by President Trump’s hard-line policies and the lack of meaningful reforms out of Congress, libertarianism has found common ground with its traditional big-government progressive foes.

Nowrasteh, who said he can debate the social science with little concern for political considerations, has become one of the most active and unapologetic voices in favor of liberalizing immigration.

“[Activists] may think that they are trying to convince other people who disagree with them to come over. Some of them try it, but most of what they say and do is to convince the people who already agree with them,” he said.

Nowrasteh, who holds two degrees in economics, an undergraduate from George Mason University and a graduate from the London School of Economics, says his academic approach — and his ability to “speak conservatese” — allow him to burst out of the echo chambers that can trap liberals and conservatives.

“So you see people who are activists who insist on using the term ‘undocumented,’ for instance, to signal to the members of their political tribe that they consider illegal immigrants to be humans and worthy of respect,” said Nowrasteh, a Southern California native.

“But if you’re trying to convince a conservative, someone who doesn’t agree with you, you say the word ‘undocumented,’ they think, ‘That guy is just a wishy-washy liberal who wants to have open borders and convince everyone to come in,’ ” he continued.

Nowrasteh has used that rhetorical flexibility to engage with some of the most ardent conservative supporters of reduced immigration, even co-writing a book with Mark Krikorian, the outspoken head of the Center for Immigration Studies, a think tank that supports reducing even legal immigration.

Nowrasteh relishes in approaching non-like-minded audiences with his ideas.

“My first challenge is to just answer their specific criticisms exactly as they’re asked. So for instance somebody says, ‘Well, what about all the illegal immigrant crime in the United States?’

“And I’ll say, ‘listen, the incarceration rate for illegal immigrants is about half that of native-born Americans,’” said Nowrasteh.

While Nowrasteh enjoys the heated debates that come with his work, as he thinks of himself as an otherwise “pretty boring guy.”

“I mean, I like to go shooting, I like guns, I like to read. I read a lot of fiction. I have two kids who I love more than anything in the world, and I want to have more children. And I’m happily married, and my life is successful,” he said.

Still, Nowrasteh says openness to immigration is economically more in line with conservatives and politically promotes American values that should appeal to both sides of the debate.

In arguing for a more open immigration system, Nowrasteh says, he “ribs” his liberal allies about their allegiance with an immigration policy that, academically speaking, implies deregulation of labor markets.

“The labor market is the most distorted in the United States by government regulation. So we’re arguing, all of us, for a liberalization that would ultimately diminish those economic distortions,” Nowrasteh said.

“I poke and ask them, ‘Does it make you feel comfortable arguing for such a radical pro-capitalist policy that would liberalize such an important market?’ ”

On a more serious note, Nowrasteh makes the argument — both to liberals and conservatives — that open, orderly and inclusive immigration is a measurable mark of American exceptionalism.

“I want us to continue to excel at this thing that we’ve done so well at historically. I don’t want to turn into another boring homogeneous European country obsessed with blood, borders and culture,” he said.