Support for immigration shouldn't be partisan

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On the evening of July 20 in Washington, D.C., a group of friends and I huddled around our reserved table at the National Press Club. We raised our glasses of wine in celebration of our friend passing the U.S. Citizenship test, finally gaining citizenship after a 10-month process.

We took turns asking each other questions from the test, seeing if the native-born Americans at the table could answer the questions from memory.

"What are the two longest rivers in the United States?"

"Who was Susan B. Anthony?"

The group collapsed in laughter when we realized that the newest citizen knew far more American trivia than anyone else at the table.

The questions on the citizenship test highlight something important about legal immigration. Namely, that it's a luxury. Someone who has time to study the tedious test questions, undergo the prolonged waiting period, and shell out the money to become a citizen is in a much more privileged position than the average Central American migrant catching a ride on a dangerous train or attempting to cross the Rio Grande.

But what does the luxury status of legal immigration have to do with our current political climate? Conservatives often argue that they do support immigration, provided it's legal. But Ellis Island closed in 1954, leaving a complicated and frustratingly enigmatic system in its place. If we are going to insist on the enforcement of our immigration laws, we need to make sure legal immigration is actually a reasonably viable option, and with the convoluted system we have now, it isn't always.

"Americans first," conservatives say. But what if immigration does help Americans, including ones in low-skill jobs?

In February, the famous immigration opponent Tucker Carlson debated Alex Nowrasteh, a pro-immigration policy scholar from the Cato Institute, resulting in a highly shared video clip where Nowrasteh renounced the conservative idea that immigration hurts American workers. Carlson was visibly rattled by Nowrasteh's market-centric explanations of immigration's benefits, since pro-immigration advocates typically argue in terms of morality, not economics.

It turns out that discussing immigration in economic terms was persuasive to conservative viewers. The video comments reflect the optimistic idea that many economically-inclined conservatives are ready for immigration to become a bipartisan issue.

One respondent wrote, "I hate to say it, but Tucker and conservatives are currently losing this argument when it comes to economic facts. We need reform."

The economic data on immigration paints a simple picture: immigration is mutually beneficial. And while conservatives argue that immigrants force wages down because of an increased supply of labor, they forget that immigrants also create a demand for goods and services, which ultimately creates more jobs.

By most estimates, the only people that are economically hurt by immigration are adults who didn't finish high school, a group that comprises less than 10% of the population. Moreover, the Americans who notice falling wages are often able to switch professions and move up the wage ladder as a result.

With immigration as highly politicized as it is today, it is important to put facts first, and, contrary to popular belief, the economic data supports more immigration, not less.