



Pathway to citizenship solves labor shortage

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Given the realities of a labor market radically upended by the pandemic, Republicans in Congress have a historic opportunity to strengthen and expand our workforce while fostering economic growth when our nation needs it most. Free market conservatives, who believe our economy does best when employers and employees exchange work-for-wages, freely, without government interference, face two options. We can either work in a bipartisan manner to shape pending immigration bills like the bipartisan Durbin-Graham Dream Act, or foolishly risk having no voice at all when such legislation undergoes the reconciliation process at the hands of Democrats.

While the politics of using reconciliation to help people gain legal status are complicated, the economic effects are not. Aside from the Dream Act, bipartisan bills like the Bennett-Crapo Senate companion bill to the House's Farm Workforce Modernization Act and the SECURE Act would have a positive effect on the U.S. economy during the post-Covid recovery. Many of the people who would gain legal status are currently working, often illegally. Legalizing their employment would be a massive economic deregulation that should boost economic output.

According to research from the Cato Institute, people who live here illegally have historically started out making less wages than native-born workers because they work and live in black markets. Employers can get away with paying them less to compensate themselves for the legal risk of hiring these immigrants. Removing that legal penalty will raise their wages, make the immigrants more productive, and allow many of them to move to better jobs.

There's also no threat that these legalized immigrants will take jobs from American workers. The truth is, many of them are already working in the United States. And because legalization will increase their productivity and wages, they will have more purchasing power, creating employment opportunities for others.

When it comes to crimes with victims, such as violent and property offenses, people living here illegally are much less likely to be convicted of crimes than native-born Americans.

Data suggests that allowing people living here illegally to gain legal status could lower their crime rates even further. For example, people living here illegally are more likely to work than other demographics. Legalizing them will likely increase their employment further because their

wages will rise. Thus, property crime committed by people living here without permission, which is already low, would likely fall even lower.

As we saw after amnesty legislation passed in 1986, people here illegally who find it harder to work are more likely to commit property crimes. In fact, Arizona's passage of harsh immigration enforcement measures in 2007 may have increased crime by making it harder to work. By making it easier to work instead of penalizing immigrants for non-violent violations, the government could reduce the already low crime rate for people living here without permission even further.

Lastly, population growth in the United States is slowing. Americans are having fewer children than ever and there's little prospect of that reversing in the near future. The U.S. economy is growing, and businesses are trying to hire workers, but bad unemployment insurance policy that pays people to be unemployed combined with a sluggishly growing U.S. population makes it hard for businesses to expand. In many states, like Utah, there are more job openings than unemployed workers to fill them.

Legalizing people here without permission and, hopefully, going further and increasing legal immigration from abroad will help us avoid population decline, including depressed economic activity. Countries with shrinking populations don't innovate, grow, or successfully compete in geopolitics.

Immigration policy isn't charity nor should it be viewed as such. Legalizing people living here illegally is just one step toward helping our economy compete. Legalizing people residing here without permission through the reconciliation process is a small step, but one that is good for the United States.

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