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Immigration debate at Pitt offers different views on Trump policy

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There were few liberals on hand for the debate on immigration that took place at the University of Pittsburgh Wednesday night and many of those who did attend were removed after disrupting the discussion. Still, dueling views on the right were on display from a libertarian and a conservative as the two tangled over President Donald Trump's handling over immigration issues.

"Immigration is not charity. It's good for us," said Alex Nowrasteh from the Cato Institute's Center for Global Liberty, a libertarian think tank that backs an open-door immigration policy.

Speaking to more than 150 students in a student union ballroom, Mr. Nowrasteh warned that efforts to control immigration would ultimately hurt Americans. He predicted that Mr. Trump's proposal to build a wall along the border with Mexico, for example, would prove an "expensive boondoggle. ... I'm sure this isn't news ... but Mexico is not going to be paying for that ..."

Mr. Nowrasteh also took issue with the Trump administration's harsh approach to "sanctuary cities," where local law enforcement declines to aid federal immigration officials. "The incarceration rate for any illegal immigrant is one-third of that of a native-born American," Mr. Nowrasteh said.

Hans Anatol von Spakovsky, who works on voting rights and immigration issues for the Heritage Foundation, took issue with those numbers. But in any case, he said, "If these individuals were not in the United States ... they wouldn't be committing crimes" at all.

Mr. Spakovsky said that while "I understand the immigration from a family standpoint" — his parents met in a postwar refugee camp in Germany — "illegal immigration goes against something that this country was founded on, which is the rule of law."

And while Mr. Nowrasteh emphasized immigrants' willingness to work and boost the economy, Mr. Spakovsky focused on the downside. Many illegal immigrants, he said, "are low-skilled and low-educated," and pose a threat to working-class Americans in particular.

Mr. Spakovsky's remarks in particular — and his use of the phrase "illegal aliens" — were disrupted by student protesters, several of whom wore party hats, coughed loudly, and played "The Star Spangled Banner" on kazoos. "Take your hate somewhere else!" one shouted, before police led him out of the room.

"There was a Q&A section at the end," another attendee shouted. "You could have waited."