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Consistent free market advocates should oppose immigration restrictions

By Ilya Somin

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Dave Brat, the conservative Republican who recently defeated House Majority Leader Eric Cantor in a GOP primary, claims to be a strong free market advocate. But as Cato Institute scholar Alex Nowrasteh points out, there is a glaring contradiction between his support for free markets and his opposition to even modest immigration reform:

Dave Brat won a stunning and surprising victory in last night's primary election in Virginia, unseating House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.). But Brat doesn't seem to understand the very issue that seems to have dominated his historic upset and propelled him to Capitol Hill.

Brat considers himself a free-market conservative, claiming on MSNBC following his unexpected win that he's against "any distortion to free markets." Brat also campaigned against immigration reform, saying that "It's the most symbolic issue that captures the difference between myself and Eric Cantor in this race." But it's impossible to square Brat's laudable support for free markets and his opposition to immigration reform.

Immigration is an economic issue. Fundamentally, it is about the movement of workers, entrepreneurs and consumers to locations where they can maximize the value of their labor, businesses and purchasing power.

But America's current immigration system is highly protectionist and restrictive. In contrast to the first 131 years of American history, there is currently no green card for lower-skilled workers. Some highly skilled workers, families and refugees can get green cards, but there is no category for lower-skilled workers unless they are closely related to an American. That severe prohibition on the movement of lower-skilled workers is a deep and destructive intervention into the market economy....

Only a lightly regulated economy can determine efficient wages and the optimal allocation of workers to variously demanded tasks, but the government intercedes at every step of the immigration process. Expensive labor certification requirements that seek to protect American workers from migrant competition make a mockery of free markets.

And yet Republicans are somehow able to claim the mantle of free-market advocacy while making draconian immigration restrictions a touchstone of their political platform. Brat fancies himself a free-market economist, but he can't seem to comprehend this glaring contradiction.

More sophisticated conservative immigration restrictionists argue that keeping out immigrants is necessary to prevent increases in the size of the welfare state. But, as Nowratesh points out, evidence from both the United States and Europe undercuts claims that increased immigration leads to increased welfare spending. In many cases, it actually tends to reduce it, by diminishing support for welfare among native-born citizens (who generally have more political influence than recent immigrants do). Moreover, it would take a truly gigantic increase in welfare spending to create a distortion in the market as great as that inflicted by immigration restrictions, which block thousands of productive transactions every day, and forcibly consign millions of people to Third World poverty.

Economic efficiency is far from the only reason to support liberalization of immigration laws, or even the most important one. Immigration restrictions inflict many injustices. But Brat and other conservatives who consider themselves free market advocates should carefully consider whether the massive government intervention represented by immigration restrictions is really consistent with their overall philosophy.

UPDATE: In addition to claiming to be a free market advocate, Brat also says he wants to limit the federal government's powers to those enumerated in the Constitution:

Brat, who teaches Third World economics, sounded every bit the professor as he addressed his stunned supporters Tuesday night.

"The 10th Amendment is the big one; the Constitution has enumerated powers belonging to the federal government. All the rest of the powers belong to the states and the people," he said, getting huge applause.

As I explain here, the power to restrict immigration is *not* actually one of the enumerated powers of Congress in the Constitution. Federal immigration restrictions are, of course, permitted under modern Supreme Court precedents that have greatly expanded Congress' powers far beyond their original meaning. But conservative originalists who want to confine Congress to its enumerated powers are usually not big fans of such nonoriginalist precedents.

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