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Beware of right-wingers peddling snake oil on immigration reform

By: Jennifer Rubin – May 6, 2013

If you listen to anti-immigration voices (and let's be clear — the vast majority oppose an increase in legal immigration), you'd think immigration is hugely unpopular with the base and will be enormously expensive. These are both false and so easily proved that you have to question the intellectual integrity of those parroting these talking points.

First, unlike screechy right-wing bloggers and dead-wood magazine writers, a large majority of Republican voters in poll after poll show that they are amenable to a reform plan along the Gang of 8 lines. In one such survey, pollsters find that “71 percent of all voters, including 74 percent of conservative Republicans and 78 percent of liberal Democrats, supported a plan similar to the Gang of Eight proposal.” Understand that leading immigration reformer Sen. Marco Rubio (R-Fla.) is in touch with the majority of Republicans on this issue (as are Republican Sens. Jeff Flake of Arizona and Rand Paul of Kentucky, Rep. Paul Ryan of Wisconsin and a long list of governors); the exclusionists are not. This might be why they feel compelled to tar their party's stars — or airbrush them out of the picture.

The Heritage Foundation will be out shortly with a study that will preposterously claim that the Gang of 8 reform will cost more than \$2 trillion. Understand that there are about 11 million people who may be legalized. Really — each one is going to cost the taxpayers about half a million bucks and contribute nothing? The Cato Institute has already come up with a detailed pre-rebuttal of Heritage's work. And, ironically, even the Congressional Budget Office can figure out that with dynamic scoring of the type pioneered by Heritage (when it was an intellectual trailblazer for conservatives), the country and the Treasury come out ahead.

Such are the perils of a once-respected think tank hiring a reactionary pol instead of a bona fide scholar to head its institution. It is interesting that under more rigorous intellectual leadership Heritage in 2006 reached conclusions entirely at odds with its current anti-immigration stance.

Even the concern over border security has gotten overhyped. Demographic guru and conservative journalist Michael Barone chides them:

During most of that time Mexico's birth rates were high, and its economy was hit by periodic crashes. In most of those years the United States was generating large numbers of new jobs, especially in California and Texas. The wave of immigration from Mexico followed.

Today conditions are different. Mexico's birth rates have fallen, its economy is growing while ours struggles, and the dream of homeownership in the U.S. was shattered as foreclosures took a heavy toll on Hispanic immigrants.

We can and do better on the border — though we should keep in mind that Texas leaders including Gov. Rick Perry don't want a fence along the Rio Grande. But those who fear that legalization will trigger another wave of illegals would be wise to direct their attention to other parts of the legislation.

These include an E-verify system and guest-worker provisions (which, when in effect in the 1950s and '60s, kept illegal immigration *down*).

A guy who knows a thing or two about the GOP grassroots and fiscal conservatism, Grover Norquist of the Americans for Tax Reform testified about two weeks ago, referencing both the Heritage 2006 study and its work in the 1980s, as well as widespread support from traditional GOP groups including law enforcement:

I am certain the immigration exclusionists will latch onto the Heritage report and keep insisting this is all a liberal elite plot to ignore the GOP base. They will continue to hype the border issue. But if so, then what does it say about their respect for conservative fiscal analysis over the last decade or so? Perhaps we really have figured out who is conservative (attached to free markets and facts) and who is reactionary, insisting the facts are malleable.

UPDATE: Already Doug Holtz-Eakin and Americans for Tax Reform slam the Heritage report. A spokesperson for Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) was more restrained, telling me: "The Congressional Budget Office has found that fixing our broken immigration system could help our economy grow. A proper accounting of immigration reform should take into account these dynamic effects."