



# Why Some of the Most Conservative Republicans Are Pro-Immigration

Dec 2, 2014

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Even those denying the harm of climate change can get some things right. Take, for example, studies arguing for a liberalized immigration policy by the Cato Institute, a conservative libertarian think tank started by the vast wealth of right-wingers Charles and David Koch.

Both the institute and the Koch brothers are, of course, well known. The brothers are notorious for their funding of ultraconservative candidates and causes, as well as smearing climate change science, opposing labor unions, working to cut government regulation and protecting the oil and gas industry, source of much of their wealth.

As for the Cato Institute, Mark Ames described it well in an April 2012 article in the *Nation* magazine, saying it was “a rank, powerful right-wing corporate front group deeply woven into the Republican Party machinery, as unprincipled and cynical in its relentless service of the 1 percent’s interests as it is hostile to the progressive cause.”

Surprisingly, Cato has produced some of the best-researched and most well-reasoned work in favor of immigration. Unlike others in the “Republican Party machinery,” Cato would welcome the 11.2 million immigrants who came here without the documents needed to cross the border.

Having such an organization sympathetic to undocumented immigrants doesn’t make sense—unless you understand the Republican Party today. The Republicans are a mess of tangled rivalries, philosophical disputes, and participants who range from intellectual habitués of right-wing think tanks to know-nothing members of Congress from conservative, mostly white districts.

Although Republican anti-immigrant politicians dominate cable news, there’s much churning in the party behind the sound bites and shouting. A number of Republican conservatives favor immigrants being permitted to stay and work in the country, even if they arrived without papers. Possibly, they are motivated by a desire for cheap labor, plus industry’s need for more of the technically adept. Still, although they don’t like President Barack Obama’s executive action legalizing the status of about 5 million undocumented immigrants, they stand apart from Republican hard-liners.

The Cato Institute clearly and strongly spells out on its website the benefits of immigration, whether or not it is following all the legal procedures:

“The overriding impact of immigrants is to strengthen and enrich American culture, increase the total output of the economy, and raise the standard of living of American citizens. Immigrants are advantageous to the United States for several reasons. Since they are willing to take a chance in a new land, they are self-selected on the basis on motivation, risk taking, work ethic, and other attributes beneficial to a nation. They tend to come to the United States during their prime working years. ... They contribute to the workforce and make huge net contributions to old-age entitlement programs, primarily Social Security. Immigrants tend to fill niches in the labor market where demand is highest relative to supply, complementing rather than directly competing with American workers. ... Their children tend to reach high levels of achievement in American schools and in society at large.”

Alex Nowrasteh, Cato immigrant policy analyst, wrote in U.S. News & World Report on Nov. 21, “governing by executive order is no way to run an immigration policy, let alone an entire government. But the resort to unilateral action does not happen in a vacuum; it is borne out of poorly written, arbitrary and confusing laws. The GOP-controlled Congress should respond to Obama’s executive order by passing a bill that simplifies the immigration system.

“Rather than charging directly at Obama’s executive order, Republicans should circle behind him and offer their own reform package that will transform our immigration laws from a confused mess into a coherent and functional system whose victims don’t demand executive actions to save them from it.”

Another conservative, Sal Russo, co-founder of Tea Party Express, wrote in Roll Call in May, “The U.S. immigration system is flawed and broken. Conservatives should be at the forefront of reform so the law reflects the just interests of the United States, not misty-eyed ideals of some of the liberal do-gooder reformers. What is good for America should be the sole criteria for immigration reform.”

He advocated improved border security and legalization of the 11 million plus in the country without papers. They should, he said, pay taxes, undergo background checks, learn English, “be committed to our basic freedoms” and understand the Constitution.

Since we have Supreme Court justices who couldn’t pass that test, it’s clearly too much to ask of anyone. But give Russo and those like him credit for advocating something other than the negativism of the far right.

It’s difficult to argue with the Cato Institute’s research.

Writing for Cato in 2005, Daniel Griswold noted that earlier generations of immigrants came to this country at substantially higher rates than today’s do, faced the same prejudices and assimilated.

In the 1990s, 1.5 Mexican immigrants, both legal and undocumented, per 1,000 U.S. residents came here. That's far lower than the 19th century Irish. Between 1841 and 1860, America absorbed 3.6 Irish immigrants a year for every 1,000 U.S. residents. "For half a century, from 1841 to 1890, the rate of German immigration was heavier in every decade than the current inflow of Mexicans," Griswold wrote. "In the first decade of the 20th century, Russian, Italian, and Austro-Hungarian immigration each separately surpassed the current rate of Mexican migration. Yet the United States managed to absorb each of these distinct cultural and linguistic cohorts into American society."

Like these earlier immigrants, Griswold said, the Mexicans are assimilating into American society, dispersing around the country from port-of-entry states such as California and Texas. Southern states are among those with the fastest growing Hispanic populations.

A study by the Migration Policy Institute, a nonpartisan organization studying immigration around the world, provides evidence of that assimilation.

Among immigrants, mostly from Mexico, in South Carolina, half spoke English "well" to "very well" or spoke only English. The rest spoke English poorly or not at all.

Most speak Spanish at home. But the immigrants are participating in a key element of the assimilation process, education. A total of 11 percent had bachelor, graduate or professional degrees. An additional 12 percent had some college or associate of arts degrees. High school or GED degrees had been earned by 27 percent.

The figures were similar for Mississippi, North Carolina, Alabama and Arkansas. The same goes for the state with the largest number of undocumented immigrants, California, with 3,166,000. A total of 44 percent of them speak English either well, very well or speak only English, although most speak Spanish at home. Of the California immigrants, 10 percent have bachelor's, graduate or professional degrees; 11 percent have associate of arts degrees; 21 percent are high school graduates and 19 percent are in high school.

Another force for assimilation is religion. Los Angeles has the nation's largest Catholic diocese, and two out of three Catholics are Hispanic. They scrimp to send their children to Catholic schools and from there to college.

The Republican far right wants to deny millions of them the chance. They scorn the hard work of immigrants who for generations have strengthened this country. These xenophobes are a spiteful minority who have paralyzed the House of Representatives and terrorized their speaker, John Boehner. History and a surprising number of their own party are against them.