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Citizenship Is a Privilege

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Several Republican presidential contenders have called for ending birthright citizenship for children born to parents who are in this country illegally. Vivek Ramaswamy—a first-generation American born to Indian immigrant parents—was the most recent to do so, last week during an appearance on CNN. During that appearance, Ramaswamy even suggested that children of illegal immigrants should earn their voting rights through military or community service, or by taking a civics test as immigrants who choose to become American citizens must.

Ramaswamy is right: Ending birthright citizenship for children of illegal immigrants would make the American immigration system more just and promote patriotism for naturalized citizens.

As a legal immigrant whose family lived here for over a decade and worked to get citizenship through proper channels, I believe that the people hurt most by illegal immigration are legal immigrants. The negative impacts of illegal immigration on legal immigrants come in two parts, the first being more measurable. Illegal immigrants receive preferential treatment, ranging from amnesty and visa-less paths to citizenship to free tuition in progressive states. Those who went through legal processes to become naturalized citizens question the benefit of pursuing legal methods instead of taking the handouts, shortcuts, and special treatment.

My family emigrated in the year 2000, when two of the seven most egregious amnesty bills in American history were signed into law, which added an estimated 1.3 million individuals to the immigration pipeline alongside us and made the entire process from immigration to naturalization take more than 11 years in total. Years later, when my now husband, a British immigrant and now naturalized citizen, came to attend college in the U.S., he had to pay more to attend university than a citizen would, as international-student fees are higher than standard tuition—quite the opposite of the free college being offered to immigrants who don't come here for through the proper channels.

The second negative effect of illegal immigration has to do with how immigrants are perceived. Immigration as a whole gets a bad rap when American citizens see illegal immigrants running across the Rio Grande at the southern border or not being deported after committing slews of crimes. Illegal immigrants are much to blame for the negative perception of immigration in general, particularly in Republican and conservative circles.

Legal immigration done through proper channels benefits both the immigrant and the country. Research published by the Cato Institute in 2019 highlighted the finding that immigrants who choose to become citizens self-report higher levels of patriotism than their counterparts and have more faith in existing government institutions. Key findings in the study included the notion that “immigrants who are American citizens are even more likely to agree with the statement that America is better than most other countries than are native-born Americans, 79 percent to 73 percent.” Researchers also noted that “75 percent of immigrants who are American citizens are very proud to be American compared to only 69 percent of native-born Americans.”

Immigrants typically come here either to make their own lives better, or to make America better, and often for some combination of the two reasons. Becoming a citizen is a privilege and a choice that those who aren't born here spend a decade—or several—considering.

I was brought here as a child by my parents. I didn't choose to come here initially, but I chose to stay and enjoy the full rights and privileges of citizenship. There isn't much of a difference between being brought here as a child in the womb or as a toddler like I was—both are decisions made by a child's parents. But growing up in a family who valued American freedoms enough to respect the nation's legal systems made all the difference to me.

Living here for decades or more as a resident and waiting for the day that you become a citizen makes being an American seem like the privilege that it truly is. That reality is lost on many citizens who didn't earn it.

Videos from conservative pundits and run-of-the-mill YouTube personalities show that something like a citizenship test made up of civics questions would do many of us some good. People who can't answer questions about our past like “Whom did this country win independence from?” and “Who fought in the Civil War?” shouldn't be making decisions about our future.

Ending birthright citizenship for children of illegal immigrants would prompt those children to learn patriotism on their own, allowing them to decide whether or not to go through the process of becoming an American citizen. Should they choose to go through this process, they would be more appreciative of the liberties granted to them than if those liberties had merely been given to them at birth.

To borrow a phrase from presidential candidate Nikki Haley, who is a first-generation immigrant from Indian parents, even on our worst days, we are still blessed to live in America. Here, we acknowledge our diverse past and fight for a freer future. We know that America is not perfect, but it is a whole lot better than where we came from. If the opposite were true, we wouldn't be here.