

Commentary: The ugly Mexican-American immigration debate



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By Ruben Navarrette Jr.
Special to CNN

SAN DIEGO, California (CNN) -- In an episode of the television show "Seinfeld," Jerry Seinfeld worries that his dentist has converted to Judaism so he can tell jokes about Jewish people. Someone asks Seinfeld, "And this offends you as a Jewish person?" No, he says, "it offends me as a comedian."

As a Mexican-American, that's how I feel when someone takes note of my support for comprehensive immigration reform, or my opposition to absurd "solutions" to the immigration problem, and concludes that I'm more Mexican than American.

Anyone who thinks there is no racism in this debate should read my e-mail. You'd find that readers say things to me they'd probably never say to a columnist who wasn't Latino. Like this: "You want your people here and despite your convoluted attempts to justify your position, you clearly don't give a whit on how they get here." Or this: "You keep justifying the illegal immigrants because you are a Mexican." Or this: "It is soooo obvious that you are a racist who is ONLY looking out for "your" people!"

Others suggest that I wouldn't be so quick to defend illegal immigrants if so many of them hadn't come from Mexico, or suggest that U.S-born Latinos like me have a vested interest in "bringing in your relatives" or in using immigration to increase the size and power of the U.S. Hispanic population. Others accuse me of having a secret agenda.

They're half right. I do have an agenda, but it's no secret. I've written op-eds and columns for nearly 20 years, and I still write 15,000 words a month.

My views are well-known. As an opinion writer, my agenda is to expose shameful politicians who use immigration to scare up votes, to be skeptical of feel-good solutions that don't work, and -- consistent with the journalist creed -- to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

My agenda is to demand what this debate really needs: more honesty, an end to hypocrisy, a ban on simple solutions, to be purged of racism and nativism, and an understanding that our anger should be aimed not at people but at government.

My agenda is to make sure that illegal immigrants, whatever their ethnicity, not be treated as scapegoats, picked on, or unfairly blamed for all of society's ills while we turn ourselves inside out making excuses for their accomplices -- the employers who hire them.

As a Mexican-American, I needn't choose between being Mexican and American. I'm both. But, it's true: I am more one than the other. As an American, I care about the little guy; Mexico doesn't. As an American, I recognize the positive impact of legal immigration; Mexico doesn't. As an American, I care about fairness and stamping out racism and prejudice; Mexico doesn't. In the country that nearly 100 years ago cast afloat my Mexican grandfather, there are winners and losers; in mine, we take it as fact that with hard work and sacrifice, anyone can win.

Some assume that the ugly tone of the immigration debate offends me as a Mexican. No. It offends me as an American.

Ruben Navarrette Jr. is a member of the editorial board of the San Diego Union-Tribune and a nationally syndicated columnist. Read his column [here](#).