

Five myths of anti-immigration talk

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It's time to debunk the biggest myths of the anti-immigration movement that has swept this country over the last two years, and may still have an impact on the 2008 presidential race: that they are not anti-Hispanic nor oppose legal immigration, but are only against "illegal" immigration.

Before we get into why most U.S. Republican presidential hopefuls -- with the exception of Sen. John McCain -- and cable television anti-immigration crusaders on CNN and Fox News are deceiving the public with their claim that they are only against "illegal" immigration, let me tell you what brings me to address this issue.

Last week, after I wrote about the loss of "anti-immigration" candidates in the New Hampshire primary, I was instantly flooded with more than 100 e-mails that almost unanimously criticized me for labeling Republican hopefuls Mitt Romney, Mike Huckabee and others as "anti-immigration" candidates.

They are not "anti-immigration," but anti-"illegal" immigration, the readers said, almost in unison. So here goes my respectful response to this and other big myths of the anti-immigration movement:

--Myth No. 1: "We are only against illegal immigration. Undocumented immigrants should get in line for visas." That's deceptive because you can't demand that people get into line when, for the most part, there is no line to get into.

While the U.S. labor market is demanding 1.5 million mostly low-skilled immigrants a year -- and will demand many more in coming years, as the U.S. population becomes increasingly educated -- the current immigration system allows into the U.S. an average of one million legal immigrants a year, and most of them are already here.

"There is a huge mismatch between what the U.S. labor market needs and the supply of immigration visas," says Frank Sharry, head of the National Immigration Forum, which advocates both secure borders and a path to legal residence for many of the 12 million undocumented immigrants in the United States.

On top of that, most anti-immigration groups want to reduce legal immigration. The Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), a favorite of radio and cable television Hispanic immigrant-bashing news shows, wants to reduce legal immigration from the current 1 million a year to about 300,000, with a 20-year cooling-off period.

--Myth No. 2: "Anti-immigration advocates are not anti-Hispanic." Maybe many aren't, but when was the last time you heard anti-immigration Republican hopefuls or cable

television talk show hosts lashing out against illegal immigrants from Canada? In addition, the escalating immigration hysteria has created an ugly environment that affects all Hispanics -- both legal and undocumented -- in many parts of the country, as recent studies by the Anti-Defamation League and the Southern Poverty Law Center have shown.

"We are seeing more discrimination and harassment," says Michele Waslin, of the Immigration Policy Center. "Anybody who is Hispanic-looking or has an Hispanic last name is being treated as an undocumented immigrant."

--Myth No. 3: "We are a nation of laws, and the law says you have to enter the country legally." Yes, but we are also a nation of immigrants. And, by the way, nearly half of all undocumented immigrants enter the country legally, and overstay their visas.

--Myth No. 4: "Building a border fence will solve the problem." Wrong. As long as the per capita income in the United States is five times bigger than that of Mexico, and as long as U.S. labor market demands millions of low-skilled jobs that Americans won't fill, people will jump over the fence, dig tunnels under it or come through Canada.

--Myth No. 5: Those of us who criticize anti-immigration groups are "amnesty" and "open borders" supporters. Baloney. I, for one, support both border protection and an earned path to legalization for millions of undocumented workers who pay taxes and are willing to learn English.

My conclusion: Let's call things by their names, and agree that most opponents of a comprehensive immigration package are anti-immigration.

The only way to solve the current immigration crisis will be to legalize undocumented workers who have paid their dues, and to increase economic integration with Mexico and the rest of Latin America in order to reduce poverty and emigration pressures south of the border. The rest is, for the most part, populist demagoguery.