

Kidding Ourselves About Immigration

Time

Dec. 06, 2007

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What you are supposed to say about immigration--what most of the presidential candidates say, what the radio talk jocks say--is that you are not against immigration. Not at all. You salute the hard work and noble aspirations of those who are lining up at American consulates around the world. But that is legal immigration. What you oppose is illegal immigration.

This formula is not very helpful. We all oppose breaking the law, or we ought to. Saying that you oppose illegal immigration is like saying you oppose illegal drug use or illegal speeding. Of course you do, or should. The question is whether you think the law draws the line in the right place. Should using marijuana be illegal? Should the speed limit be raised--or lowered? The fact that you believe in obeying the law reveals nothing about what you think the law ought to be, or why.

Another question: Why are you so upset about this particular form of lawbreaking? After all, there are lots of laws, not all of them enforced with vigor. The suspicion naturally arises that the illegality is not what bothers you. What bothers you is the immigration. There is an easy way to test this. Reducing illegal immigration is hard, but increasing legal immigration would be easy. If your view is that legal immigration is good and illegal immigration is bad, how about increasing legal immigration? How about doubling it? Any takers? So in the end, this is not really a debate about illegal immigration. This is a debate about immigration.

And it's barely a debate at all. On the Democratic side, the arcane issue of whether illegals should be able to get a driver's license has bitten both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama. On the Republican side, the candidates take turns accusing one another of committing some act of human decency toward illegals, and indignantly denying that they did any such thing. Immigration has long divided both parties, with advocates and opponents in each. Among Republicans, support for immigration was economic (corporations), while opposition was cultural (nativists). Among Democrats, it was the reverse: support for immigration was cultural (ethnic groups), while opposition was economic (unions). Now, for whatever reason, support for immigration is limited to an eccentric alliance of high-minded Council on Foreign Relations types, the mainstream media, high-tech entrepreneurs, Latinos, the Wall Street Journal editorial page and President George W. Bush. Everyone else, it seems, is again.

Maybe the aginners are right, and immigration is now damaging our country, stealing jobs and opportunity, ripping off taxpayers, fragmenting our culture. I doubt it, but maybe so. Certainly, it's true that we can't let in everyone who wants to come. There is some number of immigrants that is too many. I don't believe we're past that point, but maybe we are. In any event, a democracy has the right to decide that it has reached such a point. There is no obligation to be fair to foreigners.

But let's not kid ourselves that all we care about is obeying the law and all we are asking illegals to do is go home and get in line like everybody else. We know perfectly well that the line is too long, and we are basically telling people to go home and not come back.

Let's not kid ourselves, either, about who we are telling this to. To characterize illegal immigrants as queue-jumping, lawbreaking scum is seriously unjust. The motives of illegal immigrants--which can be summarized as "a better life"--are identical to those of legal immigrants. In fact, they are largely identical to the motives of our own parents, grandparents and great-grandparents when they immigrated. And not just that. Ask yourself, of these three groups--today's legal and illegal immigrants and the immigrants of generations ago--which one has proven most dramatically its appreciation of our country? Which one has shown the most gumption, the most willingness to risk all to get to the U.S. and the most willingness to work hard once here? Well, everyone's story is unique. But who loves the U.S. most? On average, probably, the winners of this American-values contest would be the illegals, doing our dirty work under constant fear of eviction, getting thrown out and returning again and again.

And how about those of us lucky enough to have been born here? How would we do against the typical illegal alien in a "prove how much you love America" reality TV show?