

COMMENTARY

Navarrette: Just admit you're scared

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When talking about immigration, Americans need to get their stories straight.

The debate is about to start up again. Sen. Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., has said that he intends to introduce, after Labor Day, legislation calling for comprehensive immigration reform. Schumer has an ally in Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., who is working to rustle up support from his side of the aisle.

Recently, I was guest hosting a radio show and fielding calls on immigration. I remember two calls in particular that showed the disingenuousness of the debate. The first caller claimed: "No one is opposed to immigration ... this is a country of immigrants ... it's just illegal immigration that people are upset about." The second insisted: "The United States needs a moratorium on future immigration so we can sort out the people who are already here."

I'm glad we cleared that up: No one is opposed to immigration. ... We just want to stop it.

It sounds noble to think that we care so much about the rule of law that we hold a grudge against anyone who enters the United States illegally — or, as with almost half the illegal population in the United States, overstays a visa. Imagine how much more unseemly it would be if we wanted a wholesale ban on all immigrants — even those who seek to come into the country legally.

But if you buy into the idea behind the second call — that it's time to stop all immigration — then you're obviously concerned with more than just illegal immigration. You can tell yourself that an immigration freeze is just a practical way to try to get a grip on the system or allow newcomers to assimilate. One restrictionist group, the Center for Immigration Studies, even argues that the United States needs an almost total ban on new immigrants so that those who are lucky enough to squeak through might get a warmer welcome.

So keeping out immigrants is for their own good? What nonsense. The only thing that legal, high-skilled immigrants from China or Pakistan or Russia have in common with illegal, low-skilled immigrants from Mexico, Brazil or El Salvador is that they're all foreigners. So if you like the idea of keeping them all out of the United States, then it's hard to see how you're not simply anti-foreigner. And yet, even if you are, cheer up. You have company.

A recent Gallup poll found Americans to be less supportive of legal immigration than they were a year ago. Half of respondents (50 percent) say immigration should be

decreased, up from 39 percent last year. Close to another third (32 percent) say immigration levels should be kept the same, down from 39 percent. Only 14 percent say they should be increased, down from 18 percent. On the question of whether immigration is good or bad for the country, only a slim majority (58 percent) answered in the affirmative.

Pollsters haven't seen this kind of unwelcome attitude toward immigrants since shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. Back then, the concern was national security. This time, with unemployment high and the economy struggling, pundits insist that the backlash against immigrants is all about economic security.

They're wrong. First, it's a myth that Americans are aching to do the jobs that immigrants take. Besides, the same Gallup poll found the anxiety level about immigration was highest in regions where there are relatively few immigrants; 54 percent of people in the South want immigration decreased, while only 44 percent of people in the West feel that way. According to the theory advanced by the pundits — that the souring on immigrants is all economic — you'd have to infer that the employment picture is much bleaker in the South than in the West. But the jobless rates in those regions are comparable.

So what's the real reason so many Americans are increasingly anxious about immigration and want to cut back on it? It's all about changing demographics. Folks in the South have experienced in the last 10 years what those of us in the West experienced a generation or two ago. They see immigrants changing their surroundings and impacting the culture and it scares the daylights out of them. That many of those immigrants came to this country legally doesn't do much to calm those fears.

Why not be honest and just admit what frightens us?