

Why immigration reform matters

By George F. Will
February 14, 2014
Washington Post

Distilled to their discouraging essence, Republicans' reasons for retreating from immigration reform reflect waning confidence in American culture and in the political mission only Republicans can perform — restoring U.S. economic vigor. Without this, the nation will have a dismal future only Democrats can relish: government growing in order to allocate scarce opportunity.

Many Republicans say addressing immigration will distract from a winning focus on Obamacare. But a mature party avoids monomania, and Obamacare's manifold defects are obvious enough that voters will not require nine more months of reminders.

Many Republicans say immigration policy divides their party. If, however, the party becomes a gaggle of veto groups enforcing unanimities, it will become what completely harmonious parties are: small.

Many Republicans see in immigrants only future Democratic votes. This descent into Democratic-style identity politics is unworthy of Republicans, and unrealistic. U.S. history tells a consistent story — the party identified with prosperity, and hence opportunity, prospers.

Many Republicans have understandable cultural concerns, worrying that immigrants from this hemisphere do not experience the “psychological guillotine” that severed trans-Atlantic immigrants from prior allegiances. But are there data proving that U.S. culture has lost its assimilative power? Thirty-five percent of illegal adult immigrants have been here at least 15 years, 28 percent for 10 to 14 years and only 15 percent for less than five years. Thirty-five percent own their homes. Are we sure they are resisting assimilation?

Many Republicans rightly say that control of borders is an essential ingredient of national sovereignty. But net immigration from Mexico has recently been approximately zero. Border Patrol spending, which quadrupled in the 1990s, tripled in the 2000s. With illegal entries near a 40-year low, and a 2012 Government Accountability Office assessment that border security was then 84 percent effective, will a “border surge” of \$30 billion more for the further militarization (actually, the East Germanization) of the 1,969 miles assuage remaining worries?

Many Republicans say Barack Obama cannot be trusted to enforce reforms. This is, however, no reason for not improving immigration laws that subsequent presidents will respect. Besides, the Obama administration's deportations are, if anything, excessive, made possible by post-9/11 technological and manpower resources. As the Economist tartly noted, “a mass murder committed by mostly Saudi terrorists resulted in an almost limitless amount of money being made available for the deportation of Mexican house-painters.”

Many Republicans say immigration runs counter to U.S. social policies aiming to reduce the number of people with low levels of skill and education, and must further depress the wages of Americans at the bottom of the economic ladder, who are already paying the price for today's

economic anemia. This is true. But so is this: The Congressional Budget Office says an initial slight reduction of low wages (0.1 percent in a decade) will be followed by increased economic growth partly attributable to immigrants. Immigration is the entrepreneurial act of taking the risk of uprooting oneself and plunging into uncertainty. Small wonder, then, that immigrants are about 20 percent of owners of small businesses, and that more than 40 percent of Fortune 500 companies were founded by immigrants or their children.

George W. Bush was the first president since Woodrow Wilson to serve two terms and leave office with the average household income lower than when he entered it. Obama may be the second when he leaves during the eighth year of a wretched recovery. Forty-seven percent of the House Republican conference has been in Washington 37 months or less; 21 percent of them have never held any other elective office. Many plunged into politics because they were dismayed about the nation's trajectory under the current president *and his predecessor*. Many are understandably disposed against immigration because they have only dim memories of a more dynamic United States and have little aptitude for politics suited to, and aimed at restoring, vibrancy.

Some Depression-era progressives, expecting capitalism's crisis to produce a prolonged and perhaps permanent scarcity of jobs, hoped Social Security would open jobs for the young by encouraging older workers to retire. Progressives often are ambivalent about scarcities because they see themselves as administrators of rationing. But President Bill Clinton, refuting opposition — much of it from Democrats — to the North American Free Trade Agreement, splendidly said: "Protectionism is just a fancy word for giving up."

Opposition to immigration because the economy supposedly cannot generate sufficient jobs is similar defeatism. Zero-sum reasoning about a fixed quantity of American opportunity is for a United States in a defensive crouch, which is not for conservatives.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/george-will-why-immigration-reform-matters/2014/02/13/04e7dfac-94db-11e3-84e1-27626c5ef5fb_story.html