

Learning English is key to immigrant assimilation

One of the saddest features of modern political life is the separation of freedom and responsibility between the two major political parties. If you believe in both, you have to choose. Nowhere does this have more tragic consequences than illegal immigration.

The pro-freedom case for immigration is pretty strong. The average age of an immigrant is 28, which suggests that immigrants come during their prime working years. They are disproportionately represented in lower-skilled areas of the workforce, but also in highly skilled areas like medicine and science.

Low-skilled and high-skilled jobs are both areas where demand outstrips supply in America. Thanks to a generous welfare system, many native-born adults avoid entry-level jobs. Thanks to a broken math and science educational system, American scientists and engineers don't always offer the best value for the dollar. Neither of these problems are caused by immigrants.

Nor can anti-immigration forces claim the country is overrun. Right now, we let in 4.3 legal immigrants per 1000 residents, less than half the rate at the turn of the century. Since 1910, the percentage of foreign-born residents has dropped from 14.7 percent to 11.7 percent. Hardly a crisis.

But if that's the pro-freedom case, what about responsibility? Why do self-styled supporters of illegal immigrants never talk about this equally important consequence of freedom? For immigrants to contribute to American culture, society, and prosperity, they must be held responsible for two things.

First, they must find work, at wages the market will bear. Many advocates for illegal immigrants will talk of how the American economy "depends" on low-wage workers, and how capitalism exploits them. Their best alternative is to become legal (I agree), to join unions (I disagree), to demand more rights (really entitlements) and to mobilize politically (vote Democratic). This is a recipe for disaster.

The American economy doesn't "depend" on any one part of the labor force, skilled or otherwise. If, heaven forbid, all illegal immigrants were deported tomorrow, wages, goods and services would eventually readjust at a different equilibrium point.

It wouldn't be as good as the one we have now, but the American economy would continue to grow.

Low-wage jobs are simply where supply



OPINION
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meets demand, nothing more. That's a good thing, because everybody benefits. Mobilizing to reduce economic freedom in the name of helping immigrants just reduces the prosperity that makes immigrants want to come here in the first place.

But if America is to remain a nation united in freedom, individual rights, and equality before the law, those who aspire to citizenship must learn English. This is something we wouldn't ordinarily have to worry about if it weren't for some bad ideas made into law years ago.

I studied hard to be able to speak a foreign language. I know from personal experience that if you can't speak the language of the country you're in, you have no idea what that country is all about. That's why bilingual education is a bad idea.

In addition to finding work, immigrants should be responsible for learning English.

All government documents should be English-only, not because English speakers are superior to everybody else, but because history has made it our national language. Public school classrooms should be English-only, not because we want to hurt children from other cultures, but because we want to help them become Americans as quickly as possible.

It's ludicrous to call opponents of bilingual education racist, although it happens all the time. Polish, German, Russian, Chinese, Korean, Japanese and Indian immigrant children all become Americans very easily without the benefit of bilingual education. The Hispanic immigrant community can do the same. I believe most genuinely want to.

Because "freedom with responsibility" is a new kid on the political block, people who support it will have to pick and choose for a while. But new ideas take time to catch on, and I've always believed in politics for the long haul.

Somewhere, I'm hoping there's a Hispanic Republican up-and-comer who's willing to stand up for the value of immigrants against demagogues like Pat Buchanan. Or maybe we'll get a Democrat with the courage to say that assimilation and freedom, not separatism and handouts, are the best ways to improve the lives of immigrants. Whichever comes first, they'll have my support. I hope they'll have yours.

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