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# THE AMERICAN THINKER

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## Why Americans Hate This “Immigration” Debate

April 3rd, 2006

One of the most striking features of the immigration debate now raging in Washington is that none of the Democratic or Republican proposals seem to hold any appeal for ordinary Americans—which is why this debate is generating so much frustration among voters that no matter which proposal Congress adopts, the issue itself threatens to shatter both parties’ bases and dominate the November elections.

Simply put, the debate in Washington isn’t about “immigration” at all – and that’s the problem.

To ordinary Americans, the definition of “immigration” is very specific: You come here with absolutely nothing except a burning desire to be an American. You start off at some miserable, low-paying job that at least puts a roof over your family’s head and food on the table. You put your kids in school, tell them how lucky they are to be here – and make darn sure they do well even if that means hiring a tutor and taking a second, or third, job to pay for it. You learn English, even if you’ve got to take classes at night when you’re dead tired. You play by the rules—which means you pay your taxes, get a driver’s license and insure your car so that if yours hits mine, I can recover the cost of the damages. And you file for citizenship the first day you’re eligible.

Do all this and you become an American like all the rest of us. Your kids will lose their accents, move into the mainstream, and retain little of their heritage except a few words of your language and – if you’re lucky—an irresistible urge to visit you now and then for some of mom’s old-country cooking.

This is how the Italians made it, the Germans made it, the Dutch made it, the Poles made it, the Jews made it, and more recently how the Cubans and the Vietnamese made it. The process isn’t easy – but it works and that’s the way ordinary Americans want to keep it.

### The Two Hispanic Groups

But the millions of Hispanics who have come to our country in the last several decades – and it’s the Hispanics we’re talking about in this debate, not those from other cultures—are, in fact, two distinct groups. The first group is comprised of “immigrants” just like all the others, who have put the old country behind them and want only to be Americans. They aren’t the problem.

Indeed, most Americans welcome them among us, as we have welcomed so many other cultures.

The problem is the second group of Hispanics. *They aren't immigrants* – which is what neither the Democratic or Republican leadership seems to understand, or wants to acknowledge. They have come here solely for jobs, which isn't the same thing at all. (And many of them have come here illegally.) Whether they remain in the U.S. for one year, or ten years – or for the rest of their lives – they don't conduct themselves like immigrants. Yes, they work hard to put roofs above their heads and food on their tables – and for this we respect them. But they have little interest in learning English themselves, and instead demand that we make it possible for them to function here in Spanish. They put their children in our schools, but don't always demand as much from them as previous groups demanded of their kids. They don't always pay their taxes – or insure their cars.

In short, they aren't playing by the rules that our families played by when they immigrated to this country. And to ordinary Americans this behavior is deeply – very deeply – offensive. We see it unfolding every day in our communities, and we don't like it. This is what none of our politicians either understands, or dares to say aloud. Instead, they blather on – and on – about “amnesty” and “border security” without ever coming to grips with what is so visible, and so offensive, to so many of us – namely, all these foreigners among us who aren't behaving like immigrants.

The phrase we use to describe foreigners who come here not as “immigrants” but merely for jobs is “guest workers.” And we are told – incessantly – that we need these “guest workers” because they take jobs that Americans don't want and won't take themselves. This is true, but it's also disingenuous. Throughout our country's history, immigrants have always taken jobs that Americans don't want and won't take themselves. For crying out loud, no foreigner has ever come to our country out of a blazing ambition to dig ditches, mow lawns, bag groceries, sew clothing or clean other people's houses. If we hadn't always had a huge number of these miserable jobs available that none of “us” would do – there wouldn't have been a way for immigrants throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to step off the boat and find work.

A willingness by “immigrants” to start at the bottom – so they can move up the economic ladder or at least give their kids a shot at the higher rungs – is precisely how the system is supposed to work. And it always has. (My own family is one of the tens of millions that did precisely this. My grandfather came from Poland and found work as a pocket-maker in New York's garment district. The pay was low, the hours were long, and when the old man finally retired he could hardly move his fingers or see without thick glasses. Yet one of his sons, my uncle, became a lawyer with a fancy practice on Manhattan's Upper East Side. His kids did even better; his son wound up chairman of Stanford University's history department, and his daughter became a famous art critic, moved to London, and married an Englishman who became a member of the House of Lords. What is astonishing about this story is that – it isn't astonishing. It's the sort of thing that happens all the time, and it's why ordinary Americans don't want to change the system that made it possible.)

### **Blame the Birth Rate**

One fact that hasn't been part of the immigration debate is this: During the past two decades our national birth rate has dropped to just below the 2.1 births-per-woman replacement rate. So we really do need to "import" people because – to put it bluntly – we haven't bred enough of them ourselves to do all the work that needs to be done in an affluent, ageing society like ours. But then, we've always needed "more" people to do the work we want done. And we've always brought them in from elsewhere – as immigrants.

Yet today we have millions of foreigners among us who have come here to work, but not to immigrate. Our politicians tell us that we must accept this because – for the first time in our history—we've reached that point when we need "guest workers" who aren't immigrants to keep our economy growing. If this is true—and isn't it odd that no one has troubled to explain why it's true – then we must find some way to distinguish between "immigrants" and "guest workers" so that they aren't treated the same just because they both are here. And if it isn't true that our continued economic growth requires "guest workers" who aren't immigrants—then the entire concept of "guest workers" that lies at the core of virtually every proposal now before Congress, including amnesty for those who are here illegally, must be abandoned in favor of something that makes sense.

Until our elected officials come to grips with the real issue that's troubling ordinary Americans – not a growing population of foreigners among us, but rather a growing population of foreigners among us who aren't behaving like immigrants – public frustration will grow no matter what bill Congress passes in the coming weeks. It could lead to the kind of political explosion that none of us really wants.

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