

America needs a better mix of newcomers

Opinion
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By Tamar Jacoby

The immigration deal that the Senate produced recently is far from perfect, and its critics, left and right, make many valid points. But much of the criticism misses the forest for the trees. Left out of the debate: the historic scope and significance of the deal -- its ambition to deliver an immigration system that grapples with globalization and the choices it poses for America.

As usual, those yelling "amnesty" are the loudest voices. But they are increasingly out of sync with the public on immigration. Poll after poll in the past year shows 60 to 85 percent of voters in favor of an overhaul that would allow illegal immigrants to earn their way to citizenship by meeting certain requirements -- generally far less stringent requirements than those in the Senate compromise, which includes a \$5,000 fine, at least a 13-year wait and a trip back to the immigrant's country of origin.

More striking still, even many voters who consider earned citizenship "amnesty" so badly want the immigration problem solved that they no longer care about the label.

According to the Tarrance Group and Lake Research Partners, 33 percent of the public think earned citizenship is "the same as amnesty." But a full 62 percent of even these people support the program anyway, compared with 29 percent who oppose it. In other words, less than one-third of Americans -- just under 10 percent -- agree with the talk-radio hosts screaming "amnesty" to block an overhaul.

As for the right's new argument that requiring illegal immigrants to register and undergo security checks is amnesty, that's preposterous. Even registering -- as distinct from citizenship -- will cost \$1,000. Surely it would be good for the country to know these workers' real names, vet their backgrounds and get them paying their full freight in taxes.

But the amnesty crowd isn't only wrong and out of sync, it's also focused on the wrong part of the deal.

The 12 million illegal immigrants already in the country are here illegally because our current immigration system doesn't let in enough legal workers to meet the labor needs of our growing economy.

Of course, we have to clean up the mistakes of the past and find an appropriate way to deal with those who came illegally in recent decades. But this is much less important than the larger question of how to structure the system going forward so that we don't make the same mistake again.

This, to its credit, is what the bipartisan Senate group has tried to do by asking: How many workers do we need? Should they come on temporary or permanent visas? Can we find a way to take advantage of the modern world's increasingly integrated labor markets and still make choices about whom we want as citizens?

Last year's Senate bill hid these critical questions under a euphemism: a "temporary worker" program that would have allowed temporary workers to stay on permanently if they wanted to. Many of those questioning this year's deal have yet to grapple squarely with the hardest choices.

True, as critics say, our immigration system has traditionally been based on family ties. And newcomers' extended families often function as a social safety net, helping them do better than they would as individuals struggling alone. But surely family ties are not the only criteria that should guide us in deciding what mix of immigrants best serves our country's interests.

The Senate didn't get all the answers right. I don't think the compromise strikes the right balance between skilled and unskilled, or between temporary and permanent. It also fails to own up to the full extent of our labor needs by providing enough green cards. Much as we need doctors and engineers, we also need farmhands and construction workers. And I worry that the Mexican dishwasher who starts out on a

temporary visa, works hard and eventually rises to kitchen manager won't stand a chance in the competition for limited permanent slots.

Still, unlike many of the critics, the Senate reformers are asking the right questions. And even if their answers fall short, they have jump-started a long-overdue debate.

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