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Trump Embraces a Senseless Immigration Proposal

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD   AUG. 7, 2017

President Trump has endorsed legislation that would slash legal immigration by half, mainly by cutting the number of visas granted to relatives of citizens, while favoring people who speak English and have advanced degrees. The bill, which would do nothing to solve the country's immigration and economic challenges, is unlikely to become law. The only way to understand Mr. Trump's vocal support of an obvious turkey is as yet another attempt to energize his dwindling base of right-wing and nativist supporters.

The bill was introduced by two Republican senators, Tom Cotton of Arkansas and David Perdue of Georgia, who say it will protect American workers from competition from low-skilled foreign workers. Right now, the government issues more than a million green cards every year, most of them to relatives of citizens. A smaller number, 140,000, are provided on the basis of job skills.

The proposal would slash the total number of green cards issued by 41 percent in the first year and by 50 percent in the 10th year, with most of the cuts coming from family-based immigration. It would cap the number of refugees admitted every year and eliminate a program that provides green cards via lottery to people

from countries that send few immigrants to the United States. The bill would not reduce employment-based green cards, but it would change how the recipients are selected by putting in place a points-based system that rewards people who speak English and have advanced degrees and work experience.

The issue of immigration in America is volatile and complex and thus vulnerable to seductive promises. This bill falls into that category. Its central premise — that it would help American workers — is false. It's true that an influx of workers can cause short-term disruptions to the labor market, but the impact on the wages of native workers over a period of 10 years or more is "very small," according to a comprehensive National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine report published last year.

Moreover, as studies have repeatedly shown, immigration boosts productivity and economic growth; restricting it would have the opposite effect. Growth is determined by the changes in productivity — how much each worker produces — and the size of the work force. Productivity in recent decades has been growing more slowly than in the past for reasons that economists do not fully understand. The labor force is also growing slowly as baby boomers retire. Restricting immigration would reinforce both trends.

Mr. Trump and the senators behind this bill seem to believe that immigrants who are admitted to America because they have family ties possess few skills and are of little value to the country. That's simply not so. About 41 percent of legal immigrants, the large majority of whom are relatives of citizens, have at least a bachelor's degree, according to a 2015 Pew Research Center report.

Hostility to immigration was a pillar of Mr. Trump's presidential campaign, and he has surrounded himself with like-minded officials, so it's no surprise that he likes this bill. But it is a bridge too far for Republicans like Senators Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and Ron Johnson of Wisconsin, which makes it unlikely to go anywhere. The right approach to immigration reform would be bipartisan and comprehensive. It would include stronger enforcement, better worker protections and a pathway to citizenship for the country's 11 million unauthorized

immigrants.

A Quinnipiac poll released last week showed the president's job approval ratings at a new low, even among demographic groups that make up his base. About 61 percent of voters disapproved of the way Mr. Trump was doing his job, including half of whites without a college degree. Mr. Trump's recent messages opposing transgender people in the armed forces and encouraging aggressive behavior by the police have been seen as efforts to recapture that base. His support for this immigration bill is more of the same.

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