

Trump vs. Vance on Legal Immigration

The President sees the need for foreign workers. The Vice President wants fewer.

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Do legal immigrants enrich America or damage it? That's one of the debates now emerging on the political right, including it seems even in the White House. President Trump says the U.S. needs skilled foreign workers, while Vice President JD Vance is signaling that he wants far fewer immigrants even if they arrive legally.

Mr. Trump made his views clear in an interview Tuesday with Laura Ingraham, a longtime opponent of immigration. Asking about curbs on H-1B visas for high-skilled workers, the Fox News host told the President that "if you want to raise wages for American workers, you can't flood the country with tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of foreign workers."

Mr. Trump pushed back: "I agree, but you also do have to bring in talent." Ms. Ingraham retorted: "We have plenty of talented people here." Mr. Trump rejoined: "You don't have certain talents, and people have to learn. You can't take people off an unemployment line and say 'I'm going to put you into a factory where you're going to make missiles.'"

He then criticized his Administration's immigration raid on a Hyundai-LG Energy Solution battery plant in Georgia when hundreds of South Korean nationals were detained. "They had like 500 or 600 people, early stages to make batteries and to teach people how to do it," he said. Immigration agents "wanted them to get out of the country. You're going to need" them.

He's right. Nearly half of the Fortune 500 companies, including Nvidia, Google and Tesla, were founded by immigrants or their children. A quarter of billion-dollar U.S. startups were founded by an immigrant who arrived as an international student. These are often the people who remain in the U.S. after graduation on H-1B visas. Mr. Trump seems to recognize it is self-destructive to train these students and then send them back to India or China instead of building firms here.

As for Mr. Vance, he replied to an immigration question at a Turning Point USA event last month this way: "My honest view is that, right now, America, thanks in part to the Biden border invasion, but also thanks in part to a lot of bad immigration policy, right now, we have let in too many immigrants." He also said legal immigrants "are undercutting the wages of American workers."

On wages, Mr. Vance is repeating the lump of labor fallacy that American and foreign workers compete for a limited number of jobs. Studies have generally found that immigration raises average wages and employment of native-born workers, in part because their work is complementary. Economists from the University of California, Davis, last year calculated that immigrants increased wages for less educated native workers by 1.7% to 2.6% between 2000 and 2019. The current labor market bears this out, as many industries continue to report trouble finding able workers. [...]

This is in addition to the impact of the Administration's mass deportation strategy, which has removed more than a half million illegal migrants. Many of those removed have been in the U.S. for years and are valuable employees.

Mr. Vance conceded at Turning Point that "many immigrants do in fact enrich the United States of America." But he called for limiting legal immigration anyway. Why? "We have got to become a common community again. And you can't do that when you have such high numbers of immigration," he said. "We have got to get our overall numbers way, way down." [...]

For all of his campaigning against illegal immigration, Mr. Trump understands that America needs the world's strivers to continue to prosper. Perhaps he can make that case to his young apprentice.