

How Many Immigrants?

Senate plan will keep numbers manageable

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Now that the Senate has passed an immigration bill, a raging debate has ensued over how many would cross into our country under such a law. The Heritage Foundation's Robert Rector released a report, which GOP Sen. Jeff Sessions picked up on, that claims the legislation could produce tens of millions of new immigrants. (The first estimate was 200 million; now it's 47 million.)

Newsweek columnist Robert Samuelson latched onto the report last week to go so far as to wonder whether anyone really understands what the legislation would mean in terms of numbers of immigrants.

Actually, people have been paying attention and do know. Moreover, there's reason to believe these breathless projections aren't valid. A **National Foundation for American Policy** document released last week counters the numbers and provides context about all calculations. Consider these key points of the report:

- New immigrants would total closer to 29 million. A big reason for the lower number is that Heritage "double counts" temporary workers as new immigrants.

For example, Heritage assumes that the 200,000 annual guest workers the Senate allows would become permanent legal residents. Some may eventually, but the bill doesn't guarantee that status.

- Heritage and other calculations about new immigrants count as "new" the many people who already live here illegally. So, it isn't that millions suddenly will arrive tomorrow. The Congressional Budget Office estimates that 59 percent of new legal immigrants under the Senate plan would be "individuals who are or will be in the United States under current law and would change their immigration status."

- Calculations include close family members who have been promised a green card to join their families here. While the Senate creates more green cards, the practical effect will be to decrease long waits, not open the door to everyone and shout, "Come on over."

The bottom line is this: The Senate's proposal to put more agents on the border, create a guest worker program and give most illegal immigrants a chance to earn citizenship will produce a manageable flow of immigrants and allow border agents to focus on real security threats. That's a good thing, given that our full-employment economy needs workers and our borders need securing. As President Bush told the U.S. Chamber of Commerce on Thursday, we can only get there with comprehensive reform of our immigration laws.