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Trump's Immigration Distraction

There's no economic or health case for blocking all immigrants.

By The Editorial Board

President Trump wants the U.S. economy to reopen soon and take off “like a rocket ship.” Yet now he plans to reduce the human capital necessary for a strong recovery by suspending even more immigration to the U.S.

“In light of the attack from the Invisible Enemy, as well as the need to protect the jobs of our GREAT American Citizens, I will be signing an Executive Order to temporarily suspend immigration into the United States!” Mr. Trump tweeted Monday. On Tuesday he said it will last 60 days. The order's details haven't been disclosed, but this looks like a political distraction that could become a major restraint on economic growth if it lasts for any length of time.

One question is why this is necessary even for public-health reasons. Mr. Trump has barred travel to the U.S. from much of the world, and his Administration has stopped processing nearly all new visas for foreigners. Foreign governments have suspended nonessential travel to the U.S. All of this plus mandatory 14-day quarantines for new arrivals should block any new coronavirus surge from overseas.

There's also no evidence we've seen that immigrants are associated with the spread of Covid-19 more than anyone else. Hot spots for infection have broken out in big cities like New York, and in meat-packing plants in the Midwest, where immigrants locate. But the spread there is due to living, working or commuting in close quarters, not to larger infection rates among immigrants.

Mr. Trump's economic case is even weaker. “Decades of record immigration have produced lower wages and higher unemployment for our citizens, especially for African-American and Latino workers,” Mr. Trump said in a White House statement Tuesday.

But only weeks ago Mr. Trump was boasting about a U.S. jobless rate of 3.5% and record lows for blacks and Hispanics. Legal immigration levels were still running at an annual rate of about one million at the time, and that doesn't count illegal migrants attracted by the strong U.S.

economy. If immigrants steal American jobs, why were there millions of unfilled jobs before the pandemic?

Nearly all of the economic evidence shows that immigrants enhance American growth and jobs. Former Federal Reserve economist Madeline Zavodny, now at the University of North Florida, examined state employment levels and immigration for the **National Foundation for American Policy** in 2018. States with surges of immigration like Texas and Iowa had low jobless rates. “Having more immigrants reduces the unemployment rate and raises the labor force participation rate of U.S. natives within the same sex and education group,” she found.

Immigrants in this pandemic are providing “essential” work like farm labor, meat packing, food preparation and grocery delivery that are helping the country endure. The New American Economy advocacy group calculates that 3.8 million workers in the food industry are foreign born, and nearly 28% in agriculture. The Trump Administration knows this because on April 20 it eased regulations for H-2A agricultural visas and lifted the three-year maximum on an H-2A stay.

The White House also concedes all this by leaking that Mr. Trump’s order will carve out exceptions for farm and health-care workers. He should unless he wants crops rotting in the fields and Covid-19 patients to go untreated. The foreign-born share of U.S. doctors, nurses and other health workers is roughly 16.5%.

All of which suggests that Mr. Trump’s real calculation here is political. White House adviser Stephen Miller has long wanted to shut down most immigration, legal and illegal. In the coronavirus he may have found his opening. The country is worried, and Mr. Trump’s core supporters will cheer. With his approval rating down, Mr. Trump may feel he needs to return to one of his favorite 2016 themes. You know cynicism is afoot when the White House press secretary cites Paul Krugman as an economic authority on immigration.

But the price of all this may be a slower economic recovery that will hurt the larger public. As Kurt Huffman writes [nearby](#), employers are already having a hard time rehiring some employees who are now making much more in jobless benefits. Democrats will make Republicans vote to extend the extra \$600 a week benefit for not working into the autumn. And how “temporary” will Mr. Trump’s immigration ban be as the election approaches?

Beyond the damage to life and livelihood, the greatest threat from the coronavirus are policy mistakes that prolong the economic pain. Democrats want to use the pandemic as an excuse to put government in charge of much more of the private economy. Now Mr. Trump wants to limit America’s supply of human talent. If they succeed, we will wake up in 2021 having defeated Covid-19 but at the high cost of a diminished economic future.

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