

What You Don't Know about the Immigration Bill

BY ROBERT J. SAMUELSON

[EDITORS' NOTE: This piece was originally published on May 31, 2006, in *The Washington Post*, shortly after an extremely ill-conceived piece of "comprehensive immigration reform" legislation, SB2611, was passed by the U.S. Senate — and then, happily, died. It describes the self-censorship by mainline media that is one reason environmental scientists are as badly informed on immigration matters as is the general public — and even the politicians themselves.]

The Senate passed legislation last week that Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) hailed as "the most far-reaching immigration reform in our history." You might think that the first question anyone would ask is how much it would actually increase or decrease legal immigration. But no. After the Senate approved the bill by 62 to 36, you could not find the answer in the news columns of the *Post*, the *New York Times* or the *Wall Street Journal*. Yet the estimates do exist and are fairly startling. By rough projections, the Senate bill would *double* the legal immigration that would occur during the next two decades from about 20 million (under present law) to about 40 million.

One job of journalism is to inform the public about what our political leaders are doing. In this case, we failed. The Senate bill's sponsors didn't publicize its full impact on legal immigration, and we didn't fill the void. It's safe to say that few Americans know what the bill would do because no one has told them. Indeed, I suspect that many senators who voted for the legislation don't have a clue as to the potential overall increase in immigration.

Democracy doesn't work well without good information. Here is a classic case. It is interesting to contrast

these immigration projections with a recent survey done by the Pew Research Center. The poll asked whether the present level of legal immigration should be changed. The response: 40 percent favored a decrease, 37 percent would hold it steady and 17 percent wanted an increase. There seems to be scant support for a doubling. If the large immigration projections had been in the news, would the Senate have done what it did? Possibly, though I doubt it.

But if it had, senators would have had to defend what they were doing as sound public policy. That's the real point. They would have had to debate whether such high levels of immigration are good or bad for the country rather than adopting a measure whose largest consequences are unintended or not understood. What arguments would they have used?

No one can contend that the United States needs expanded immigration to prevent the population from shrinking. Our population is aging but not shrinking. With present immigration policies, the Census Bureau projects a U.S. population of 420 million in 2050, up from 296 million in 2005. Under the Senate bill, the figure for 2050 would expand by many millions. Another dubious argument is that much higher immigration would dramatically improve economic growth. From 2007 to 2016, the Senate bill might increase the economy's growth rate by about 0.1 percentage point annually, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimates. That's tiny; it's a rounding error.

The doubling of legal immigration under the Senate bill that I cited at the outset comes from a previously unreported estimate made by White House economists. Because the president praised the Senate bill, the administration implicitly favors a big immigration expansion. The White House estimate could be low. Robert Recro of the conservative Heritage Foundation has a higher figure. The CBO has a projection that the White House describes as close to its own. But all the forecasts envision huge increases, diverging only because they make different assumptions of how the Senate bill would operate in practice.

Robert J. Samuelson is a weekly columnist for Newsweek and The Washington Post, writing on political, economic, and social issues.

Our immigration laws involve a bewildering array of categories by which people can get a “green card” — the right to stay permanently. The Senate bill dramatically expands many of these categories and creates a large new one: “guest workers.” The term is really a misnomer, because most guest workers would receive an automatic right to apply for a green card and remain. The Senate bill authorizes 200,000 guest workers annually, plus their spouses and minor children.

largely unreported, though the *Wall Street Journal* later discussed the figures in a story on the bill’s possible budget costs.

Rector’s explanation is that the media’s “liberal” bias creates a pro-immigration slant. I think it’s more complicated. Stories generally mirror the prevailing political debate, which has concentrated on “amnesty” for existing illegal immigrants and the guest-worker program. Increases in other immigration categories were largely ignored. Reporters also cover legislative stories as sports contests — who’s winning, who’s losing — rather than delve into dreary matters of substance. We’ve had endless stories on how immigration might affect congressional elections and whether there will be a House-Senate “deal.”

But note the irony: The White House’s projected increases of legal immigration (20 million) are about twice the level of existing illegal immigrants (estimated between 10 million and 12 million). Yet, coverage overlooks the former. Here, I think, Rector has a point. Whether or not the bias is “liberal,” group-

think is a powerful force in journalism. Immigration is considered noble. People who critically examine its value or worry about its social effects are subtly considered small-minded, stupid, or bigoted. The result is selective journalism that reflects poorly on our craft and detracts from democratic dialogue. ■



Heritage Foundation Senior Research Fellow Robert Rector (right) participated in a forum on immigration during the 37th annual Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) in Washington, D.C, February 2010. CIS’s Mark Krikorian served as the moderator.

One obvious question is why most of the news media missed the larger immigration story. On May 15 Republican Sen. Jeff Sessions of Alabama held a news conference with Heritage’s Rector to announce their immigration projections and the estimated impact on the federal budget. Most national media didn’t report the news conference. The next day the CBO released its budget and immigration estimates. These, too, were

© 2006 The Washington Post Company

EDITOR’S POSTSCRIPT: Samuelson’s thesis about bias and censorship in the media is well illustrated by *The New York Times*. The routinely dishonest reportage and editorializing by that newspaper on immigration issues is analyzed in depth by William McGowan in an essay titled “Immigration and *The New York Times*” (Backgrounder, January 2011, Center for Immigration Studies). That essay, in turn, is an adaptation from McGowan’s *Gray Lady Down: What the Decline and Fall of the New York Times Means for America* (Encounter Books, 2010).