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## HOW TO INCREASE ILLEGAL IMMIGRATION

*Cutting legal visas amid a labor shortage would hurt U.S. workers.*

By The Editorial Board  
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For years immigration restrictionists have claimed that they love immigrants and merely oppose illegal entry. Apparently, that was a bait and switch. President Trump's first big restrictionist bill proposes to cut legal immigration by as much as half to 500,000 people or so a year.

The President on Wednesday endorsed legislation that aims to restrict "chain" family immigration and replace employer-sponsored green cards with a point-based system. Current policy "has placed substantial pressure on American workers, taxpayers and community resources," said Mr. Trump. How shrinking the number of workers in an economy that already has a record 5.7 million job openings is a mystery he didn't bother to explain.

U.S. citizens can now sponsor immediate family members – spouses, minor children and parents – for green cards. Their siblings and children age 21 and over also receive priority, though millions are waiting in the queue due to per-country quotas. Employers can sponsor an additional 140,000 green cards per year.

Senators Tom Cotton of Arkansas and David Perdue of Georgia have introduced legislation that would eliminate the green-card preferences for parents, adult children and siblings of U.S. citizens, which in effect would reduce legal immigration by 40 percent. Foreigners could also apply for up to 140,000 green cards via a government admissions process that awards points based on education, language ability, age, educational attainment and job skills.

There's a case for basing immigration more on skills than extended family ties. Minor children and parents should have priority, but siblings have no special claim on America. Cultural assimilation also matters, so an emphasis on English and other signs of potential success in America are worth accounting for.

The problem is that the bill's main purpose seems to be to slash the immigration rolls. In 2013 Mr. Cotton wrote in these pages that "we should welcome the many foreigners patiently obeying our laws and waiting overseas to immigrate legally." But under his bill the four million or so foreigners who have been waiting in the green-card line for years would have to reapply under the new system.

While the legislation is supposedly modelled on immigration systems in Canada and Australia, both countries are far more welcoming of foreigners. Australia admits three times as many immigrants per year than the U.S. as a share of population. Canada accepts more than twice as many, and concierges help fast-track the process for high-skilled workers.

Any point system is also arbitrary and reflects the biases of politicians – namely, Messrs. Cotton and Perdue – rather than the needs of employers. While a foreign professional

degree in a scientific field is worth 10 points, a U.S. bachelor's degree in English gets six. A 26-year-old receives 10 points – five times as many points as a 46-year-old. Employers have a better idea of the skills they need than does the Labor Department bureaucracy.

Mr. Trump and the restrictionists argue the legislation will reduce the welfare rolls while protecting U.S. workers from competition. But that's another misdirection play. Legal residents who aren't citizens don't qualify for most entitlement programs, and their labor participation rate is higher than that of U.S. citizens.

As for the argument that "low-skilled" immigrants are displacing U.S. workers, what economy are they living in? The U.S. jobless rate in July fell again to 4.3 percent, and employers in a myriad of industries including construction, agriculture and hospitality are facing a severe labor shortage.

The H-2A visa program for agriculture is byzantine while the caps on seasonal guest workers are far too low to satisfy employer demand. Within five days of the H-1B visa lottery opening for high-skilled workers this year, employers had submitted 199,000 applications for 60,000 positions. A shrinking labor supply means slower growth, which means fewer jobs for U.S. workers.

One bizarre counterclaim is that there must not be a labor shortage because wages aren't rising fast enough. But they are rising – 2.5 percent in the last year. And every economist knows that employers can only raise wages as fast as productivity and profitability allow. If the cost of labor rises too much for a specific job, employers will simply cease providing the service or move production overseas. That means fewer jobs for Americans too.

The larger irony is that by restricting legal immigration Mr. Trump would increase the incentive for more foreigners to cross the border illegally or overstay their visas. The solution, as ever, is a legal immigration system that is generous with visas and flexible enough to meet the demands of a growing U.S. economy. If the White House is serious about passing something in Congress, it needs to recognize that reality.