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OUR WALLED-OFF IMMIGRATION DEBATE

New rules lay out more restrictive definition as to who constitutes close family, raising the ire of immigration advocates

By William A. Galston
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Democratic analysts have begun a long-overdue review of their party's weakness among white working-class voters. Because postelection research has shown that immigration is important to these Americans, the review has brought to the surface a long-suppressed debate among Democrats about this contentious issue.

More than politics is at stake. The basic architecture of today's immigration policy was enacted more than half a century ago. Immigrants' share of the U.S. population has since tripled while economic opportunities for low-skilled workers have diminished. It is not unreasonable to ask whether a 1965 law is suitable for today's economy and society.

Among the Democrats weighing in is Stanley Greenberg, a veteran pollster who came to prominence in the mid-1980s for his study of "Reagan Democrats" in Macomb County, Mich. A month into the Trump presidency, Mr. Greenberg returned to Macomb County and interviewed white working-class Trump supporters who had previously voted for Barack Obama. "It was clear," he [reports](#), "how central concerns about immigration, borders, foreignness, and Islam were to their receptivity to his call to take back America. Many thought [Hillary] Clinton, on the other hand, wanted 'open borders.'" "As they saw it, "Democrats have moved from seeking to manage and champion the nation's growing diversity to seeming to champion immigrant rights over American citizens'."

During a public event convened by the liberal magazine American Prospect, Mr. Greenberg was blunt about the political implications of his findings. "You can only succeed if people believe you want to manage immigration," he declared. Every center-left party in the West is struggling with this issue, he warned. "Sometimes it's fatal."

A week later, Peter Beinart of the Atlantic entered the fray. As recently as a decade ago, he [pointed out](#), progressives were willing to entertain tough questions about immigration. In 2006 Paul Krugman [wrote that](#) "immigration reduces the wages of domestic workers who compete with immigrants" and that "the fiscal burden of low-wage immigrants is also pretty clear." His conclusion: "We'll need to reduce the inflow of low-skill immigrants." As recently as 2014, Mr. Krugman [said](#) that "if you don't feel conflicted about these issues, there's something wrong with you."

Also in 2006 a young senator declared: "When I see Mexican flags waved at pro-immigration demonstrations, I sometimes feel a flush of patriotic resentment. When I'm forced to use a translator to communicate with the guy fixing my car, I feel a certain frustration." That was Barack Obama.

By 2015 these economic and cultural doubts were out of bounds for Democrats with political aspirations. Early in his campaign Sen. Bernie Sanders was pilloried for suggesting that low-

skilled immigrants would depress wages for American workers. He quickly retreated, even though the facts were mainly on his side. If he had been feeling brave, he might have cited a National Academies of Sciences report that found today's immigrant-headed families with children are disproportionately likely to rely on food stamps and Medicaid – and slower than their predecessors to learn English.

The constriction of Democratic debate is part of a larger problem facing today's upscale liberals, who are fixated on cultural issues. In October 2016, progressive stalwart Robert Kuttner [wrote](#) in the American Prospect that it is hard to tell white working-class voters to check their privilege when they are so much worse off than their parents. "The charge of political correctness, used so deftly by Trump, resonates with white workaday voters in part because liberals seem to give priority to every other downtrodden group, from illegal aliens (sic) to transgender people to brown pelicans." The "sic" was Mr. Kuttner's.

In a recent issue of Foreign Affairs, two staunch liberal internationalists [point to](#) the politics of immigration as the principal obstacle to a sustainable balance between openness and national solidarity. "It is not bigotry," write Jeff Colgan and Robert Keohane, "to calibrate immigration levels to the ability of immigrants to assimilate and to society's ability to adjust."

A new immigration policy need not mean surrendering to nativism. A recent study by the Public Religion Research Institute [found](#) majorities of Republicans as well as Democrats who favor a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants, provided that they meet certain conditions. By contrast, support for identifying and deporting them is low in every sector of the population.

Humane treatment for those already here is compatible with a fundamental shift from an immigration policy focused on family reunification to one that prizes education and skills and emphasizes the rapid attainment of English fluency. If both parties are willing to set aside obsolete preconceptions, this new bargain is within reach.