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MAGA wants a moratorium on legal migration, too

The most committed members of the base mean to impose an unpopular litmus test

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IT WAS RICK RICHARDS'S third time at AmericaFest. The 63-year-old Arizonan arrived at Turning Point USA's annual conference in Phoenix, the week before Christmas, wearing a sweater featuring Donald Trump in a Santa hat. During a session called "Mass migration is causing all the problems, actually" he waited to question the MCs, two Blaze TV personalities. "Do you think we could bring more people to the side of the Republican mindset by being more careful with our words when we talk about immigration?" he asked. Maybe, he continued, we should specify that we're against illegal immigration but we want to bring people in the right way. "Frankly, we don't like legal immigration either," replied John Doyle, a conservative provocateur and one of the hosts. He suggested ending all immigration for at least ten years. Someone in the crowd shouted "100!", then, "Forever!"

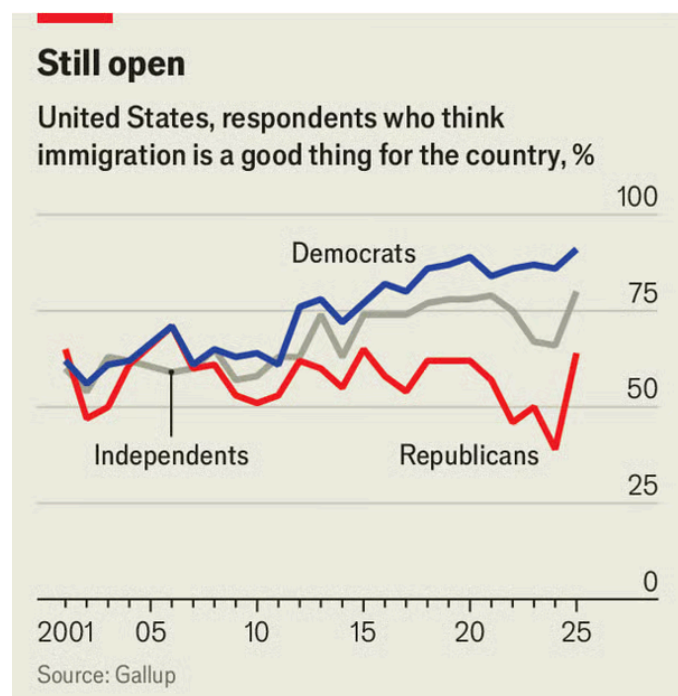


CHART: THE ECONOMIST

Most Americans share Mr Richards's view. Majorities of both major political parties think immigration is a good thing. Republican support for newcomers dipped when the southern border was overrun, but has since rebounded. Mr Trump's incoherence on legal immigration reflects the tensions of his coalition. He has blocked many would-be immigrants from coming to America, detained foreign students and threatened to strip the citizenship of others. This is the handiwork of Stephen Miller, the architect of Mr Trump's immigration

policy, who views America as a country threatened by an "invasion" of outsiders. It is also red meat for his base. But then the president tells the *New York Times* that he would "love to have a comprehensive immigration policy", which is

thrilling thought for tech titans, such as Elon Musk, who support the president but rely on high-skilled visas to staff their companies.

It is tempting to think that Mr Trump's success at the southern border could give him political cover to pursue proper immigration reform, which America has not passed for decades and badly needs. But so far his musings about reform are just words. In practice, over the past year the Trump administration has rewritten America's legal immigration system by executive fiat to make it almost unworkable.

For Millerites, this was not an overnight victory. Throughout American history, waves of new immigrants have preceded nativist backlashes. In 1924 Congress limited the number of people who could come to America each year to 2% of every nationality's population in 1890—before many eastern and southern Europeans had arrived. The law barred immigrants from Asia. Albert Johnson, the bill's sponsor in the House of Representatives, argued that “the myth of the melting pot has been discredited” because newer immigrants were too slow to assimilate. Rigid quotas persisted until 1965, when Congress reformed America's immigration system to prioritise family connections and skilled labour.

That 1965 law became infamous among those sceptical of legal migration. In the 1990s and 2000s Pat Buchanan, a conservative who broke with Republican orthodoxy, echoed Johnson while arguing that Americans are “addicted to this myth” of the melting pot. Though Mr Buchanan's presidential campaigns went nowhere, he was a prolific commentator whose “America First” ideas have influenced MAGA leaders. Young conservatives at AmericaFest fixated on the idea that assimilation has failed, and that America, which they regard as a “pan-European country”, has been “conquered”. In their telling, culture and heritage bind Americans, not democratic ideals. When that is your starting point then all immigration, legal and illegal, is seen as a threat to cohesion.

Congress has all but given up legislating, so rewriting the 1965 law is a non-starter. But Mr Trump is trying his best to reinstate a discriminatory immigration

40 countries, most of which are in Africa and the Middle East. About one in five people seeking to move to America will now be barred from doing so. Close to 90% of refugees admitted since Mr Trump's first full month in office are white South Africans. In December the president paused the green-card lottery programme for people from countries with low rates of immigration to America, citing national-security concerns. On January 21st the administration will stop processing visas for immigrants of 75 countries. The State Department argues that applicants from those nations are more likely to end up receiving government benefits, though Mr Bier found that in 2024 non-citizens were actually underrepresented among those convicted of welfare fraud.

That is just the beginning. The head of Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) has said he hopes to eliminate a visa that allows foreign students to stay in America for up to three years after graduation. Many of these students—especially those in science and tech—eventually secure an H-1B visa. Mr Trump has threatened to revoke the citizenship of immigrants who came to America years ago. A fraud scandal in Minnesota has led anti-immigration Republicans to fixate on denaturalising Somali immigrants. And by seeking to end birthright citizenship, the president is trying to change altogether the legal definition of what makes an American (though the Supreme Court seems unlikely to bless that effort).

It is not just the new policies themselves, but how they are being rolled out that makes the system impossible to navigate. Alexander Dgebuadze, an immigration lawyer, calls his search for guidance on vague policies the “chaos to compliance” pipeline. In September, when the administration announced a \$100,000 fee for new H-1B visas, he recalls watching Howard Lutnick, the commerce secretary, do TV hits in the hope that he would say something clarifying. It eventually became clear that the new fee applies only to some applicants, but employers are spooked. Mr Dgebuadze reckons his clients have submitted 20% fewer names for the H-1B lottery than at the same point last year. Ellen Freeman, a lawyer in Pittsburgh, says some of her clients are reconsidering whether they want to live in America at all. “There is no more legal versus unauthorised” in the eyes of the administration, she says. “There is no more differentiation.”

The Trump administration's discriminatory policies and bureaucratic delays threaten America's ability to attract top talent. A recent paper by Shai Bernstein, of Harvard University and his co-authors found that immigrants make up 16% of inventors but are responsible for nearly a third of American innovation. Other countries see opportunity. Though Canada has limited international students, in December it launched an effort to woo foreign scholars.

At AmericaFest, Mr Richards was shocked to find himself so ostracised. He considered for a moment whether Blaze TV's best and brightest were right in arguing that America needs an "immigration moratorium", but decided against it. "All of us were immigrants at some point," he offered. "I thought more people were going to be on my side." ■

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