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Immigration debate creates strange bedfellows

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It's easy to stick labels on people and organizations: Democrat and Republican, liberal and conservative, blue and red. But as the recent debate on immigration shows, labels aren't always helpful guides.

Both the Cato Institute (www.cato.org) and The Heritage Foundation (www.heritage.org) can be called conservative organizations. Both are critical of expanding the size and scope of the federal government. Both are in favor of devolving federal power to the states. On President George Bush's immigration plan, they both ...actually, they both have offered different responses.

The Heritage Foundation found little to like about Bush's ideas. It called the proposed guest worker program "a bureaucratic nightmare." In another rupture of an allegedly solid coalition, the foundation's chief expert on welfare policy, Robert Rector, tangled with the putatively conservative White House over the bill. Rector emphasized the social cost of immigration. For example, he wrote that "the cost of amnesty alone will be \$2.6 trillion once the amnesty recipients reach retirement age."

The Cato Institute, on the other hand, took a more sanguine view. Daniel Griswold, a trade policy expert, explicitly called for some sort of guest-worker program. He further argued that "Despite the claims by critics of immigration reform, America is not being 'flooded' with immigrants." Rather, he said, "A higher share of U.S. residents was foreign-born in every decade from 1860 through 1920 than is today."

High-skilled labor gets a lot of love. But are the poorly skilled workers a drain on the economy? Do they impose significant cost on the welfare system (as Rector has argued), or steal jobs from Americans?

Griswold argued that even low-skilled illegal immigrants are a net plus to the economy, and points to Labor Department numbers to buttress his claim. Our workforce, he said, is getting better educated, which generally leads to higher productivity and thus higher wages. That's all good, but it also means that fewer people will be interested in the low-skilled jobs that will still be around. Labor-saving devices can go only so far.

The standard (perhaps clichéd) argument for encouraging such immigrants is that they "do jobs Americans don't do," which suggests that Americans are simply lazy.

But as a nation, we've upscaled and supersized our housing, automobiles, and everything else. Why wouldn't people, especially those who have the education to take on higher-skilled jobs, think any differently about employment? Each generation sets its sights higher than previous ones. To meet the need for low-skilled labor, then, Griswold endorses a guest-worker program.

Joining Cato in endorsing the basics of the now-failed immigration plan is an odd collection of groups that as a matter of course favor an increased role for government, putting them at odds with Cato in many instances.

Citizens for Tax Justice (www.democracyinaction.org), for example, describes itself as "wiring the progressive movement." In a recent newsletter, it said there is "no rational reason to fear that immigrants will drain the federal government's resources." It pointed to a report from the Congressional Budget Office suggesting that the bill will shrink the federal budget deficit.

Another group of the left, the Century Foundation (www.tcf.org), also disagrees with Heritage and sides with Cato. Bernard Wasow wrote that in the debate between whether "an increase in supply of unskilled immigrants should drive down the relative wage of the unskilled" and "optimists, who say the evidence is lacking," the optimists are right.

He points to California, the ideal state in which to test the proposition that low-skilled workers depress the wages of the native born. Citing the work of University of California scholar Giovanni Peri, Wasow says that since 1990, wages have gone up in the state because of immigration, not despite it. The more highly educated have benefited more than the low-skilled workers—supporting the claims of some immigration critics—but both groups have enjoyed rising incomes.

Economic impact is only one element of the immigration debate, however. There's the question of multiculturalism versus assimilation and national security, to start with. Even though guest-worker programs may make sense economically, the cultural clashes found in Germany, which makes extensive use of guest workers, may give us reasons to pause before embarking on a similar path.

One thing's for sure: You can expect some more odd-bedfellow politics on the question of immigration.