

## *The Economy / Closing borders would be a shame*

The Philadelphia Inquirer

April 9, 2006 Sunday

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**The Philadelphia Inquirer**

Found on Philly.com

**Section:** BUSINESS; Pg. E01

**Length:** 647 words

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### **Body**

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The immigration argument is agonizing, polarizing, and as generally unpleasant as any issue I can recall.

But I'll say this in its favor: It takes conventional labels such as "liberal" and "conservative" and puts them where they belong - in the shredder.

Everyone knows by now that the right is split over immigration. Hard-liners, including Republican leaders in the House of Representatives, want fences and mass deportations.

Others - I was about to say "moderates," but that's inaccurate, since many social and fiscal conservatives also lean this way - favor legalization and "guest-worker" programs that try to match immigration flows to the U.S. labor market.

This has produced some dramatic - and, to liberals, highly entertaining - internecine warfare. Republicans are using names on each other that they used to save for Democrats, and invoking flag and religion to support both open and **closed borders**.

Lefties can't enjoy this spectacle too much, however, since they're equally, if not as publicly, divided themselves.

Many liberals instinctively want to stand with the Latinos and others who have been staging huge, semi-spontaneous pro-immigrant rallies across the country recently.

### **Economically unnerving**

But others find the rapid growth in immigrant numbers unnerving - if not culturally, then economically.

They believe immigrants compete for jobs, making it easier for employers to keep wages down and tougher in particular for low-skilled native-born Americans to move up the **economic** ladder.

This belief draws support from some economists, such as Harvard's George Borjas, who has argued that wages for low-income American workers would be as much as 8 percent higher if not for the large number of illegal immigrants currently in the U.S. labor force.

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Citing Borjas' work, some liberals have thrown in with the **closed-border** conservatives, saying that a major crackdown on illegal immigrants is necessary to improve the chances of urban minorities and other low-income native-born Americans.

For instance, essayist Michael Lind recently denounced what he called "Cheap Labor Liberalism" in the "progressive" blog TPM Cafe:

"For New Deal liberals, the best antipoverty program is a high private-sector wage, resulting from tight labor markets created artificially by public-sector workfare programs combined with immigration restriction," Lind wrote.

But is it really necessary to attempt to deport about 12 million illegal immigrants in order to improve the job prospects of low-income Americans?

### Increased wages

Fortunately, it may not be. Some recent **economic** papers call Borjas' conclusions into question, arguing that open immigration actually increases the wages of most native-born American workers, rather than decreasing them.

In one recent paper, Gianmarco Ottaviano of the University of Bologna in Italy and Giovanni Peri of the University of California at Davis agree that wages for high-school dropouts fall slightly - by about 1 percent - because of immigration.

But for the vast majority of native-born workers who have at least a high school diploma, immigration raises wages by 3 percent or 4 percent, Ottaviano and Peri contend.

How? Immigrants don't just take "jobs Americans don't want. They create new and more specialized jobs, and enable businesses to grow in ways they otherwise could not."

From restaurant kitchens to landscape-gardening crews to construction sites and day-care centers, immigrants add size and diversity to an **economy**. (Think Los Angeles vs. Omaha.)

As a result, both wages and house prices grew faster in cities that attracted large numbers of immigrants in the 1990s, the researchers found.

That analysis makes intuitive sense in Philadelphia, where both immigration and **economic** growth lagged the nation for decades.

Now that we're finally starting to get a bit more of both, it would be a **shame** to let either the right or the left shut it off.

## Classification

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**Language:** ENGLISH

**Publication-Type:** Newspaper

**Subject:** IMMIGRATION (94%); US REPUBLICAN PARTY (90%); POLITICAL PARTIES (90%); CONSERVATISM (90%); LIBERALISM (90%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (89%); WAGES & SALARIES (89%); LABOR SECTOR PERFORMANCE (88%); LOW INCOME PERSONS (86%); TERRITORIAL & NATIONAL **BORDERS** (78%); MIGRATION ISSUES (78%); FOREIGN LABOR (78%); US DEMOCRATIC PARTY (76%); LABOR FORCE (74%); MINORITY GROUPS (73%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (71%); RELIGION (68%); **ECONOMICS** (66%); POVERTY & HOMELESSNESS (63%); WRITERS (60%)

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**Industry:** WRITERS (60%)

**Geographic:** CALIFORNIA, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (95%); ITALY (50%)

**Load-Date:** April 9, 2006

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