

Listening to the Sam's Clubbers

Immigration is very much on their minds.

BY IRWIN M. STELZER

Conservative intellectuals and pundits who are overcome with enthusiasm for wooing “Sam’s Club Republicans,” as opposed to the more traditional country club Republicans, might want to stop off at a Sam’s Club or, just as good, a Wal-Mart store to chat with the customers who are not new immigrants—about half, by some reckonings. If they did, they might find that this sought-after constituency is not quite in agreement with the relaxed immigration policy that John McCain and President Bush favor. At least not with the rules as they now are.

The resentment of illegal immigration is more than a mere under-the-breath mumble and isn’t assuaged with talk of eventual assimilation, of adding to the cultural richness of America, of how hardworking the newcomers are (as, indeed, many of them are). But hardworking at creating and tending to the gardens and pools of upper income Americans, many of whom wouldn’t know how to find a Sam’s Club without a GPS, doesn’t butter the parsnips of working-class Americans, typified by the folks I talked to this August in many parts of Colorado, a swing state.

The first complaint is about the cost of health care. Not the cost of fixing whatever is wrong with themselves, or even for uninsured and poorer neighbors, but the cost of caring for immigrants, many or most of whom they assume are illegally in this country. One woman talks of holding down three jobs so that she can pay off an expensive operation she endured. Meanwhile, the hospital has to bear the costs—some of them loaded onto her bill, she is certain—of maternity wards crowded with immigrants, most of whom she believes are illegal who either cannot or do not pay the costs of bringing into the world the new

Irwin M. Stelzer, a contributing editor to THE WEEKLY STANDARD, is director of economic policy studies at the Hudson Institute and a columnist for the Sunday Times (London).

American citizens who they hope will make their own deportation less likely.

A father of a young teenager rails at the fact that his daughter is being held back in school because so many of her classmates can’t speak English and, bored by lessons they don’t understand, disrupt the class—teachers being helpless to prevent such mayhem in part because they feel physically threatened by the young miscreants. And these Sam’s Clubbers are more than a little annoyed when they hear it suggested that the teachers—not to mention cops and doctors—should learn to speak Spanish. “Press 2 for Spanish” is one of the most derided terms in this part of America.

Others talk of the destruction of property values in towns that were once peaceful, indeed sleepy places, but now are uninhabitable in the evenings and on weekends because young male immigrants—unfettered by family constraints with their wives and children left behind in Mexico, El Salvador, Nicaragua, or other Hispanic countries—consume more beer than they should, and behave as you would expect under the circumstances.

No use trotting out the argument that the economy needs these workers, and that in states that are driving them away by deploying novel law-enforcement techniques—Arizona is a recent example—employers are groaning about shortages of agricultural and construction labor. To the Sam’s Club crowd, this is nothing more than an argument by employers eager to keep wages down and preferring to deal with a workforce made docile by its illegal status, or by a weak bargaining position due to the need for a paycheck, and now. They don’t need studies by Harvard professor George Borjas to tell them what their eyes reveal—that immigrant workers put downward pressure on wages.

Or try the argument that one of the aspects of American exceptionalism and greatness has been its ability to absorb immigrants, to turn the huddled masses into hardworking, tax-paying American citizens. Even throw in the heroism of newcomers who are serving in the armed

In a rather indirect way, the Democrat's proposal to tax the rich, which includes many employers, and distribute the proceeds to middle-income families, a group that includes many Sam's Clubbers, will accomplish the reimbursement of losers by winners that should be the goal of immigration policy. But only very, very indirectly and wastefully indeed.

Robert Solow, the left-of-center Nobel economics laureate, recently told a conference in Landau, Germany, that economists must develop ways of redistributing income "to those who are damaged by otherwise useful developments in the economy from those who profit." His is the old liberal cry for a more equitable distribution of wealth. But as John Selden pointed out in 1869, "Equity . . . is . . . what everyone pleases to make it. Equity is a roguish thing."

The best answer to such a policy call for "equity" is a policy based on economic efficiency, which is served when the consumer of a good or service pays all the costs associated with the creation of that good or service. If the consumer pays less, the good will be overconsumed. Which is what happens when an employer can avoid some of the costs of his decision to hire immigrant workers: He will

use such labor in greater quantities than if he had to pay its full cost, which includes the cost imposed on society. Conservatives who for years have opposed setting a minimum wage for young workers on the ground that employers will therefore use fewer such workers, must surely understand this.

Such is the architecture of an immigration policy that will appeal to Sam's Clubbers, and not merely to Hillary's shot-and-a-beer in the back of a pickup crowd. It won't be easy to craft. But I leave that chore to legislative carpenters.

America needs immigration. We need the young workers who are daring enough to try to make their way in a foreign country. We need the infusion of cultures different from our own, so long as they come along with the desire to assimilate. Most of all, we need to regain our pride as a haven for the hardworking and the persecuted. John McCain once asked a small group, in response to a hostile question about his views on immigration, "What is America about if it is not a place that welcomes hardworking people?" Now, if only he would match an economically sophisticated immigration policy to the grandeur of that vision of what this country is all about, he might indeed be able to garner votes in the aisles of Sam's Clubs. ♦