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IMMIGRATION DEBATE CAUGHT IN A TIME WARP

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Politicians like to say they are debating what should happen tomorrow, but way too often they are instead locked in argument about something that happened yesterday. A classic case: the current immigration debate.

In three years of trying, Congress has failed in high-profile efforts to overhaul the nation's immigration laws. Meanwhile, the early 2016 Republican presidential sweepstakes are heavily colored by debate over what candidates will or won't do, or have or haven't done, about immigration.

Yet the premise of this immigration debate – that waves of Hispanic immigrants are sweeping across our southern border, swelling the nation's population of undocumented immigrants and transforming the culture and economy – is caught in a kind of time warp, dominated by trends of decades past and largely missing the immigration issues that really matter today.

In fact, the nation's immigration flows have undergone a fundamental change, as have the issues that are relevant now, even if the political conversation hasn't. Consider some data points:

- In 2013, China replaced Mexico as the top country sending immigrants to the U.S., according a new Census Bureau study. Indeed, immigration from both China and India has been increasing for a decade, and inflows from other Asian countries are climbing as well, while immigration from Mexico has been declining, the study notes.
- During the first six months of the current fiscal year, the number of apprehensions of immigrants coming illegally across the southwest border – a strong indicator of efforts to cross the border illegally – was 28 percent lower than in the prior year, the Department of Homeland Security reported late last month. Overall, apprehensions today are “a fraction of where they were 15 years ago,” the department says, and data confirm that.
- The influx of young and unaccompanied minors from Central America, which generated much attention and alarm a year ago, has declined dramatically, partly the result of a serious effort by Mexico to clamp down on use of its territory as a transit point. The number of unaccompanied minors from Central America that Mexico has deported rose 56 percent in the first five months of the current fiscal year, according to a Pew Research Center analysis.

A clear sign of substantial change arrived three years ago this spring, when Pew reported that, after four decades of a steady inflow of illegal Mexican immigrants into the U.S., the influx had begun to reverse – that is, more Mexicans were returning to Mexico than were coming into the U.S., according to data from both countries.

A combination of factors – steady improvements in Mexico's economy, strengthened border enforcement and deportations, a decline in Mexican birth rates – has come together over a period of years to change the picture.

Yet that change has barely made a dent in the political rhetoric that shapes the national immigration conversation. "The immigration debate seems to be stuck around the year 2006, and before then," says Alex Nowrasteh, an immigration analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute. "Almost all the negative comments I get are, 'Why do you want illiterate Mexicans here?'"

The new face of American immigrants is more likely to be Asian, and Mr. Nowrasteh notes that the Asian arrivals bring a significantly different profile than did Hispanic immigrants of recent decades: They are better educated and more economically successful. "Asian immigrants are doing amazingly well in this country," he says.

At this point, says William Frey of the Brookings Institution, "the growth of the Hispanic population in this country is coming largely from natural increase, not from immigration." In a new book and other writings, Mr. Frey explores the demographic shifts that really are shaping 21st century America, and that ought to be shaping its immigration debate. The country's white population is barely growing, he writes, and in a decade or so will begin to decline. The U.S. is on its way to becoming a country with no clear racial majority – a true patchwork nation.

In that economy, Mr. Frey notes, immigrant contributions become "absolutely necessary.... We need to understand what our labor force really needs in this country." That's the subject that should be the crux of today's immigration debate. Yet, Mr. Frey says, "none of this is being discussed in a rational way."

Instead, the discussion is fixated on securing a southwest border that, evidence indicates, is significantly more secure than it was a decade ago, and on deciding what to do about the 11 million undocumented aliens already here, who, everybody really knows, aren't going anywhere, unless they choose to leave. Should they be given a "path to citizenship" or a "path to legal status," and would either of those represent a form of "amnesty"?

Those are important and emotional questions, to be sure – but also more of the past than the future.