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WHO'S AFRAID OF A GUEST-WORKER PROGRAM?

By Jason I. Riley
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These days, there is little appetite in Congress or on the presidential campaign trail for addressing illegal immigration in ways other than calling for more enforcement measures. But a new national poll suggests that the voting public may be open to a different approach: guest-worker programs.

With U.S. unemployment currently above 8 percent and millions of Americans out of work, a guest-worker program for immigrants might seem like a hard sell. Yet when pollsters at the Tarrance Group asked likely voters about a proposed guest-worker program for agriculture, 70 percent of respondents expressed support, and 64 percent said that they would be more likely to vote for a candidate who backed it. Moreover, while support "is strong across the board," the survey found, "it should be noted that support is also strong among . . . Republicans (74 percent), 'hard' Republicans (75 percent), very conservative voters (67 percent), strong Tea Party supporters (71 percent), and weekly church attendees (73 percent)."

The results also reveal that despite a high level of economic anxiety in the country – and notwithstanding restrictionist lawmakers at the federal and state level who pretend that the U.S. can deport its way to full employment – voters by and large aren't interested in scapegoating the foreign born. "A strong majority of voters believe that immigration is at most a minor cause of unemployment," according to Tarrance, "and even fewer voters believe that immigrant farm workers are a cause of unemployment at all."

The electorate seems to appreciate that foreign nationals fill niches in the workforce that help grow the U.S. economy – and that giving these economic migrants more legal ways to enter the country means that fewer will come illegally. Could it be that voters have a more sophisticated understanding of human capital and labor markets than politicians give them credit for?