

The Framing of Immigration

by George Lakoff, Sam Ferguson

Framing is at the center of the recent immigration debate. Simply framing it as about "immigration" has shaped its politics, defining what count as "problems" and constraining the debate to a narrow set of issues. The language is telling. The linguistic framing is remarkable: frames for illegal immigrant, illegal alien, illegals, undocumented workers, undocumented immigrants, guest workers, temporary workers, amnesty, and border security. These linguistic expressions are anything but neutral. Each framing defines the problem in its own way, and hence constrains the solutions needed to address that problem. The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, we will analyze the framing used in the public debate. Second, we suggest some alternative framing to highlight important concerns left out of the current debate. Our point is to show that the relevant issues go far beyond what is being discussed, and that acceptance of the current framing impoverishes the discussion.

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By George Lakoff and Sam Ferguson

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On May 15th, in an address from the Oval Office, President Bush presented his proposal for "comprehensive immigration reform."

The term "immigration reform" evokes an issue-defining conceptual frame — The Immigration Problem Frame — a frame that imposes a structure on the current situation, defines a set of "problems" with that situation, and circumscribes the possibility for "solutions."

"Reform," when used in politics, indicates there is a pressing issue that needs to be addressed — take "medicare reform," "lobbying reform," "social security reform." The noun that's attached to reform — "immigration" — points to where the problem lies. Whatever noun is attached to "reform" becomes the locus of the problem and constrains what counts as a solution.

To illustrate, take "lobbying reform." In the wake of the Jack Abramoff scandal, "lobbying reform" was all the talk in the media and on Capitol Hill. The problem defined by this frame has to do with lobbyists. As a "lobbyist" problem, the solutions focused on Congressional rules regarding lobbyists. The debate centered around compensated meals, compensated trips, access by former Congressmen (who inevitably become lobbyists) to the floor of the Senate and House of representatives, lobbying disclosure, lobbyists' access to Congressional staff and the period of time between leaving the Congress and becoming a registered lobbyists.

Indeed, if the reform needed is "lobbying reform," these are reasonable solutions. But, the term "Congressional ethics reform" would have framed a problem of a much different nature, a problem with Congressmen. And it would allow very different reforms to count as solutions. After all, lobbyists are powerless if there's nobody to accept a free meal, fly on a private plane, play a round of golf in the Bahamas and, most importantly, accept the political contributions lobbyists raise on their behalf from special-interests with billions of dollars in business before the federal Government. A solution could, for example, have been Full Public Financing of Elections and free airtime for political candidates as part of the licensing of the public's airwaves to private corporations. The "lobbying reform" framing of the issue precluded such considerations from discussion, because they don't count as solutions to the "lobbying" problem. Issue-defining frames are powerful.

"Immigration reform" also evokes an issue-defining frame. Bush, in his speech, pointed out the problems that this frame defines. First, the Government has "not been in complete control of its borders." Second, millions are able to "sneak across our border" seeking to make money. Finally, once here, illegal immigrants sometimes forge documents to get work, skirting labor laws, and deceiving employers who attempt to follow the law. They may take jobs away from legal immigrants and ordinary Americans, bear children

who will be American citizens even if they are not, and use local services like schools and hospitals, which may cost a local government a great deal. This is his definition of the problem in the Immigration Reform frame.

This definition of the problem focuses entirely on the immigrants and the administrative agencies charged with overseeing immigration law. The reason is that these are the only roles present in the Immigration Problem Frame.

Bush's "comprehensive solution" entirely concerns the immigrants, citizenship laws, and the border patrol. And, from the narrow problem identified by framing it as an "immigration problem," Bush's solution is comprehensive. He has at least addressed everything that counts as a problem in the immigration frame.

But the real problem with the current situation runs broader and deeper. Consider the issue of Foreign Policy Reform, which focuses on two sub-issues:

- How has US foreign policy placed, or kept, in power oppressive governments which people are forced to flee?
- What role have international trade agreements had in creating or exacerbating people's urge to flee their homelands? If capital is going to freely cross borders, should people and labor be able to do so as well, going where globalization takes the jobs?

Such a framing of the problem would lead to a solution involving the Secretary of State, conversations with Mexico and other Central American countries, and a close examination of the promises of NAFTA, CAFTA, the WTO, the IMF and the World Bank to raise standards of living around the globe. It would inject into the globalization debate a concern for the migration and displacement of people, not simply globalization's promise for profits. This is not addressed when the issue is defined as the "immigration problem." Bush's "comprehensive solution" does not address any of these concerns. The immigration problem, in this light, is actually a globalization problem.

Perhaps the problem might be better understood as a humanitarian crisis. Can the mass migration and

displacement of people from their homelands at a rate of 800,000 people a year be understood as anything else? Unknown numbers of people have died trekking through the extreme conditions of the Arizona and New Mexico desert. Towns are being depopulated and ways of life lost in rural Mexico. Fathers feel forced to leave their families in their best attempt to provide for their kids. Everyday, boatloads of people arrive on our shores after miserable journeys at sea in deplorable conditions.

As a humanitarian crisis, the solution could involve The UN or the Organization of American States. But these bodies do not have roles in the immigration frame, so they have no place in an “immigration debate.” Framing this as just an “immigration problem” prevents us from penetrating deeper into the issue.

The current situation can also be seen as a civil rights problem. The millions of people living here who crossed illegally are for most intents and purposes Americans. They work here. They pay taxes here. Their kids are in school here. They plan to raise their families here. For the most part, they are assimilated into the American system, but are forced to live underground and in the shadows because of their legal status. They are denied ordinary civil rights. The “immigration problem” framing overlooks their basic human dignity.

Perhaps most pointedly, the “immigration problem” frame blocks an understanding of this issue as a cheap labor issue. The undocumented immigrants allow employers to pay low wages, which in turn provide the cheap consumer goods we find at WalMart and McDonalds. They are part of a move towards the cheap lifestyle, where employers and consumers find any way they can to save a dollar, regardless of the human cost. Most of us partake in this cheap lifestyle, and as a consequence, we are all complicit in the current problematic situation. Business, Consumers and Government have turned a blind eye to the problem for so long because our entire economy is structured around

subsistence wages. Americans won't do the work immigrants do not because they don't want to, but because they won't do it for such low pay. Since Bush was elected, corporate profits have doubled but there has been no increase in wages. This is really a wage problem. The workers who are being more productive are not getting paid for their increased productivity.

A solution to the “immigration problem” will not address these concerns because they are absent from the “immigration frame.”

Framing matters. The notion of this as “an immigration problem” needing “immigration reform” is not neutral.

Surface Framing

We now turn from conceptual framing of the current situation to the words used and surface frames those words evoke.

The Illegal Frame

The Illegal Frame is perhaps the most commonly used frame within the immigration debate. Journalists frequently refer to “illegal immigrants” as if it were a neutral term. But the illegal frame is highly structured. It frames the problem as one about the illegal act of crossing the border without papers. As a consequence, it fundamentally frames the problem as a legal one.

Think for a moment of a criminal. Chances are you thought about a robber, a murderer or a rapist. These are prototypical criminals, people who do harm to a person or their property. And prototypical criminals are assumed to be bad people.

“Illegal,” used as an adjective in “illegal immigrants” and “illegal aliens,” or simply as a noun in “illegals” defines the immigrants as criminals, as if they were inherently bad people. In conservative doctrine, those who break laws must be punished — or all law and order will break down. Failure

to punish is immoral.

“Illegal alien” not only stresses criminality, but stresses otherness. As we are a nation of immigrants, we can at least empathize with immigrants, illegal or not. “Aliens,” in popular culture suggests nonhuman beings invading from outer space — completely foreign, not one of us, intent on taking over our land and our way of life by gradually insinuating themselves among us. Along these lines, the word “invasion” is used by the Minutemen and right-wing bloggers to discuss the wave of people crossing the border. Right-wing language experts intent on keep them out suggest using the word “aliens” whenever possible.

These are NOT neutral terms. Imagine calling businessmen who once cheated on their taxes “illegal businessmen.” Imagine calling people who have driven over the speed limit “illegal drivers.” Is Tom Delay an “illegal Republican?”

By defining them as criminal, it overlooks the immense contributions these immigrants subsequently make by working hard for low wages. This is work that should more than make up for crossing the border. Indeed, we should be expressing our gratitude.

Immigrants who cross outside of legal channels, though, are committing offenses of a much different nature than the prototypical criminal. Their intent is not to cause harm or to steal. More accurately, they are committing victimless technical offenses, which we normally consider “violations.” By invoking the illegal frame, the severity of their offense is inflated.

The illegal frame — particularly “illegal alien” — dehumanizes. It blocks the questions of: why are people coming to the US, often times at great personal risk? What service do they provide when they are here? Why do they feel it necessary to avoid legal channels? It boils the entire debate down to questions of legality.

And it also ignores the illegal acts of employers. The

problem is not being called the Illegal Employer Problem, and employers are not called “illegals.”

The Security Frame

The logical response to the “wave” of “illegal immigration” becomes “border security.” The Government has a responsibility to provide security for its citizens from criminals and invaders. President Bush has asked to place the National Guard on the border to provide security. Indeed, he referred to “security” six times in his immigration speech.

Additionally, Congress recently appropriated money from the so-called “war on terror” for border security with Mexico. This should outrage the American public. How could Congress conflate the war on terror with illegal immigration? Terrorists come to destroy the American dream, immigrants — both documented and undocumented — come to live the American dream. But the conceptual move from illegal immigrant (criminal, evil), to border security to a front of the war on terror, an ever expanding war against evil in all places and all times wherever it is, is not far.

It is this understanding of the issue that also prompted the House to pass the punitive HR 4437, which includes a provision to make assisting illegal immigrants while they are here a felony. It is seen as aiding and abetting a criminal.

But how could this be a “security” issue? Security implies that there is a threat, and a threatened, and that the threatened needs protection. These immigrants are not a physical threat, they are a vital part of our economy and help America function. They don't want to shoot us or kill us or blow us up. They only want to weed our gardens, clean our houses, and cook our meals in search of the American Dream. They must be recognized as Americans making a vital impact and contribution. And when they are, we will cease to tolerate the substandard conditions in which they are forced to work and live. No American — indeed, no

person — should be treated so brashly.

Amnesty

“Amnesty” also fits the Illegal Frame. Amnesty is a pardoning of an illegal action — a show of either benevolence or mercy by a supreme power. It implies that the fault lies with the immigrants, and it is a righteous act for the US Government to pardon them. This again blocks the reality that Government looks the other way, and Business has gone much further — it has been a full partner in creating the current situation. If amnesty is to be granted, it seems that amnesty should be given to the businesses who knowingly or unknowingly hired the immigrants and to the Government for turning a blind eye. But amnesty to these parties is not considered, because it's an “immigration problem.” Business has no role in this frame, and Government can't be given amnesty for not enforcing its own laws.

The Undocumented Worker Frame

By comparison, the term “undocumented worker” activates a conceptual frame that seems less accusatory and more compassionate than the “illegal” frame. But a closer look reveals fundamental problems with this framing.

First, the negative “undocumented” suggests that they should be documented - that there is something wrong with them if they are not. Second, “worker” suggests that their function in America is only to work, not to be educated, have families, form communities, have lives — and vote! This term was suggested by supporters of the immigrants as less noxious than illegal aliens, and it is, but it has serious limitations. It accepts the framing of immigrants as being here only to work.

Temporary Workers

“Undocumented workers” opened the door to Bush's new proposal for “temporary workers,” who come to America for a short time, work for low wages, do not vote, have few

rights and services, and then go home so that a new wave of workers without rights, or the possibility of citizenship and voting, can come in.

This is thoroughly undemocratic and serves the financial and electoral interests of conservatives.

This term replaced “guest worker,” which was ridiculed. Imagine inviting some to dinner as a guest and then asking him to pick the vegetables, cook the dinner, and wash the dishes!

Frames Not Taken

Most of the framing initiative has been taken by conservatives. Progressives have so far abstained.

Progressives could well frame the situation as the Cheap Labor Issue or the Cheap Lifestyle Issue. Most corporations use the common economic metaphor of labor as a resource. There are two kinds of employees — the Assets (creative people and managers) and Resources (who are relatively unskilled, fungible, interchangeable). The American economy is structured to drive down the cost of resources - that is, the wages of low-skilled, replaceable workers.

Immigration increases the supply of such workers and helps to drive down wages. Cheap labor increases “productivity” and profits for employers, and it permits a cheap lifestyle for consumers who get low prices because of cheap labor. But these are not seen as “problems.” They are benefits. And people take these benefits for granted. They are not grateful to the immigrants who make them possible. Gratitude. The word is hardly ever spoken in the discourse over immigration.

Now consider the frame defined by the term “economic refugee.” A refugee is a person who has fled their homeland, due to political or social strife, and seeks asylum in another country. An economic refugee would extend this category (metaphorically, not legally, though it might be

shifted legally in the future) to include people fleeing their homeland as a result of economic insecurity.

Refugees are worthy of compassion. We should accept them into our nation. All people are entitled to a stable political community where they have reasonable life prospects to lead a fulfilling life — this is the essence of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

To frame the debate this way is to advance a progressive understanding. While immigrants are here, they should be integrated into society either temporarily, if conditions improve in their home country, or permanently, if they can integrate and become productive members of our nation. It will focus solutions on US foreign policy to be about people, not profits. The only way the migration of people from the South to the North will stop is when conditions are improved there. As long as there is a pull to the North and a push from the South, people will find their way over, no matter how big, how long or how guarded a border fence is. (As an aside, who will build that fence if all the undocumented immigrants leave?) Increased security will force people to find ever more dangerous crossings, as has already happened, without slowing the flow of immigrants. More people will die unnecessarily.

Even if we could “protect” ourselves by sealing the border and preventing businesses from hiring undocumented immigrants by imposing hefty fines or prison sentences for violations, progressives should not be satisfied. This still leaves those yearning to flee their own countries in search of a better life in deplorable situations. The problem is not dealt with by making the United States a gated community.

While these refugees are here, they must be treated with dignity and respect. Indeed, if they cannot return home, we have a responsibility to welcome them into ours. And we must treat them as Americans, not as second-class citizens, as they are currently. If they are here, they work hard and contribute to society, they are worthy of a path to

citizenship and the basic rights we are entitled to (a minimum wage, education, healthcare, a social safety net).

Currently, the undocumented immigrants living amongst us are un-enfranchised workers. They perform all the work, pay all the duties, and receive many fewer of the benefits — especially voting rights. They must be given an opportunity to come out of the shadows and lead normal lives as Americans.

The answer to this problem isn't an "open-border." The United States cannot take on the world's problems on its own. Other affluent countries need to extend a humanitarian arm to peoples fleeing oppressive economic circumstances as well. How many immigrants the United States should be willing to accept will ultimately be up to Congress.

In presenting these alternative frames, we want to inject humanitarian concerns based in compassion and empathy into the debate. The problem is dealing adequately with a humanitarian crisis that extends well beyond the southern border. The focus must shift from the immigrants themselves and domestic policy to a broader view of why so many people flee, and how we can help alleviate conditions in Mexico and Central America to prevent the flow in the first place. Only by reframing of the debate can we incorporate more global considerations. Immigration crises only arise from global disparity.

Why It's Not a Single Issue

The wealth of frames in this debate has made it confusing. The frames within the debate have been divisive. But the absence of frames to counter the idea of the "immigration problem" has also been divisive. Since each frame presents a different component of the problem, it's worth noting who stresses which frames, and which problems that frame define.

Conservatives

The conservative views:

- **Law and Order:** The “illegal immigrants” are criminals, felons, and must be punished - rounded up and sent home. There should be no amnesty. Otherwise all law will break down.
- **The Nativists:** The immigrants are diluting our culture, our language, and our values.
- **The Profiteers:** We need cheap labor to keep our profits up and our cheap lifestyle in place.
- **The Bean Counters:** We can't afford to have illegal immigrants using our tax dollars on health, education, and other services.
- **The Security Hounds:** We need more border guards and a hi-tech wall to guarantee our security.

Progressives

- **Progressivism Begins at Home:** The immigrants are taking the jobs of American works and we have to protect our workers.
- **African-American Protectionists:** Hispanic immigrants are threatening African-American jobs.
- **Provide a path to citizenship:** The immigrants have earned citizenship with their hard work, their devotion to American values, and their contribution to our society.
- **Foreign Policy Reformers:** We need to pay attention to the causes that drive others from their homelands.
- **Wage supports:** Institute a serious earned income tax credit for Americans doing otherwise low-paying jobs, so that more Americans will want to do them and fewer immigrants will be drawn here.
- **Illegal Employers:** The way to protect American workers and slow immigration of unskilled workers is to prosecute employers of unskilled workers.

We can see why this is such a complex problem and why there are so splits within both the conservative and progressive ranks.

Summing Up

The “immigration issue” is anything but. It is a complex melange of social, economic, cultural and security concerns — with conservatives and progressives split in different ways with different positions.

Framing the recent problem as an “immigration problem” pre-empts many of these considerations from entering the debate. As a consequence, any reform that “solves” the immigration problem is bound to be a patchwork solution addressing bits and pieces of much larger concerns. Bush's comprehensive reform is comprehensive, but only for the

narrow set of problems defined in the “immigration debate.” It does not address many of the questions with which progressives should be primarily concerned, issues of basic experiential well-being and political rights.

Ultimately, the way the current immigration debate is going — focusing narrowly on domestic policy, executive agencies and the immigrants — we will be faced with the same problems 10 years from now. The same long lines of immigrants waiting for legal status will persist. Temporary workers will not return home after their visas have expired, and millions of undocumented people will live amongst us. Only by broadening the understanding of the situation will the problem, or, rather, the multiple problems, be addressed and adequately solved. The immigration problem does not sit in isolation from other problems, but is symptomatic of broader social and economic concerns. The framing of the “immigration problem” must not pre-empt us from debating and beginning to address these broader concerns.