

Facts? Or Factors

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I have a dear friend who disagrees with me about the immigration issue -- she's a fence-sitter mostly, not sure that the state should or should not be passing legislation restricting access of undocumented immigrants to public services.

"I've got to think and pray about it more, and I'm not sure I know enough about the issue," she told me this morning.

I applaud her candor, and her willingness to suspend judgment until she has all the facts.

Unfortunately, facts have very little to do with the issue.

Whether immigrants are a drain or a boon to the Alabama economy is extraordinarily difficult to gauge. An economics professor here at the university told me recently that there is no reliable way to measure the costs versus the benefits of the presence of undocumented immigrants in the state.

Furthermore, he said, the question about whether immigrants are taking away jobs from Alabamians, is impossible to answer. Is a \$10-an-hour job working in 120-degree heat stooped at the waist all day a job Alabamians would be doing, if immigrants weren't "taking" that job away? There's no reliable way to know.

I've had hundreds of conversations with people all over the political spectrum about the immigration "problem." What I see is that people make their decisions to support HB56 or to fight against it on several factors, but not on facts.

One of those factors is race. Are you basically welcoming and accepting of people from other racial and ethnic groups or not?

If you think I'm wrong, explain to me why every conversation about "immigrants" always ends up using the word "Hispanic" at some point.

It definitely is about race. My blue-eyed Canadian immigrant colleague is never suspected of being "illegal." I know an ordained minister of the Gospel who has had immigration difficulties from time to time -- so although he's African, no one would ask him whether he's "illegal" or not.

Another factor -- criminality. Do you imagine a "criminal" when you think of immigrants?

A 2008 review of the research on criminality and immigration by the non-partisan Immigration Policy Center found that immigrants are much less likely than native-born to engage in criminal activity or to be incarcerated for crimes.

But what part of "illegal" don't you understand?

Being in this country without current legal immigrant status is not a crime. It is a civil offense, on the level with speeding tickets. So if you exceeded the speed limit on the way to work this morning, you are just as illegal as an immigrant without papers.

So whether you decide to support state-level immigration laws, such as those in Alabama, Arizona, Georgia and South Carolina, or whether you believe it should be left to the federal government, let's be honest. We're all talking from the heart, and not from the head.

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