

Serena Allen:

Welcome to the Policy Paycheck. My name is Serena Allen, thanks for tuning in. The Policy Paycheck was born from the idea that all people should have access to factual and relevant economic evidence about the most controversial policy topics we hear about every day. While our intended audience is American high school civics classes, even policy experts may learn something from each episode. Ideally, listeners like you will walk away better informed to not only discuss, but also form your own opinions about the policies as taxpayers we already pay for.

Today, Roberto Suro will shed light on the topic of immigration. Professor Suro holds a joint appointment in the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism and the Sol Price School of Public Policy. He was awarded a Berlin Prize for his scholarship on immigration. Thank you so much for being on our podcast today. We really appreciate you coming out here to talk to us a little bit. Today we're going to be talking about immigration, mostly focusing on the Northern Triangle, but that relates to other countries as well, and we're going to talk to that in the future. A lot of these ideas are very transferable to different crises, not only of immigration throughout history, but also on the global scale at the moment.

To start off, I wanted to touch on a brief history of the issue. I think a lot of our listeners don't know much about immigration at all before this past couple of years, and it became more of a hot topic for youth to pay attention to. I was wondering if you could touch on a little bit of the Obama administration's spending and what they did to try to help out the immigration crisis.

Roberto Suro:

Well, you have to rewind just a bit before the Obama administration, really, to get a context for where we are now. Keep in mind that the United States saw fairly little immigration between the 1920s and the 1970s. It was almost 50 years, by virtue of law and a variety of other circumstances, that brought the foreign born share of the population to an absolute low point in the 1970s, and then subsequently saw this era of Latin and Asian immigration that grew quite strong in the eighties and nineties into the 00s but fairly little policymaking. There were efforts in the late 1980s, early nineties, mid nineties, primarily addressed at the large number of labor migrants from Mexico who were coming over in substantial numbers without authorization. That was the central issue going into the 2000s.

9/11 produced a bit of a detour into antiterrorism as a focus, but then in the mid 2000s in the midst of what was a construction boom, now in retrospect we see this as the last gasps of the 1990s boom economy that carried on into the first part of the 00s, there was a very large number, a very substantial increase in fact, a bubble of sorts, of unauthorized Mexicans coming into the country which provoked, again, a focus on this issue. George W. Bush took it up and during his presidency, a basic architecture developed for a major reform which would be, increase enforcement, legalize in some way some large share of this unauthorized population, and create new legal channels so it would be more sensible. That debate stalled in the 00s and it stalled again during Obama's presidency.

We had almost 20 years of stalemate and failed policymaking to address the basic structure of our immigration policies. What we did have, the policies that were put into place were primarily the result of budget authorizations and the ability to spend money rather than to change laws. What the federal government could spend money on during this whole period, starting really under George W. Bush and then continuing through Obama, was enforcement. The 9/11 laws started it. There were laws that have been inactive in the nineties that created authorization, really beginning in 2006, with the enactment of a law that authorized the first major construction of physical barriers, the first 700 miles of what we now call wall, and very substantial increases in the manpower of the enforcement services involved in immigration at the border and in the interior. We saw a big buildup of this capability.

That continued under Obama, and under Obama it became quite real. The capacity of the enforcement machinery became substantial enough to accomplish levels of deportations in the first Obama term that had never been seen before since. Very substantial numbers, about three million people altogether under the Obama presidency. But that was supposed to be a prelude to a change in the laws. There had been this old idea, going back to the 1980s, that you close the back door to open the front door, that you needed enforcement in order to justify openness. What we got was the enforcement, but then never agreement on what that openness ought to look like.

That's the state of play in policy. We got up by the mid teens to 18, 19 billion dollars a year of enforcement spending, now we've got to be over 20. It's by far the largest enforcement undertaking that the federal government has. The Border Patrol is now up to 22, 23. It's authorized strength is close to 24,000 officers, up from, it must've been about 10,000 at 9/11. Very substantial increases, increases in detention capacity, in processing capacity, all of this, but no change in how we regulate how people come into the country. With laws that everybody agrees are antiquated and broken, broken in a way... the mantra, the immigration system being broken, has reduced public trust in all of us. Bear with me for one more moment in terms of setting the scene.

Serena Allen:

Sure. Very interesting.

Roberto Suro:

We have this set up, big boost in enforcement capability, but not what was supposed to come with it. The whole idea, starting with, Bush said explicitly, and Obama said explicitly, "Look, we're going to spend on enforcement to the point where you believe we can really maintain, if we change the laws, we're going to be able to enforce them. We're going to be able to say who gets it and who doesn't. We're going to do away with this system that nobody is satisfied with, and which created this enormous backdoor that led to a population of 10, 11, 12 million people who are unauthorized, but without the new laws." Then the flow changed.

All of a sudden, the phenomena that this policy was aimed at changed fundamentally. With the Great Recession, changes in the economy in Mexico, changes in fertility rates in

Mexico, and the effects of enforcement, the Mexican migration, which had been the largest single source of migrants during this large period of very rapid growth in the eighties and nineties in the 00s, diminished very quickly, faster than anybody thought possible. Went to net zero, basically. The Mexican migration ended between 2006 and 2010. In retrospect, now we can really see that it went down to a point where the number of people coming in and people leaving was about even. The drivers of large scale labor migration by low-skilled Mexicans, both the pull and the push factors ended.

What we saw instead, starting in 2014, was a relatively new phenomenon that is entirely different, which is these surges of migrants out of the Northern Triangle of Central America, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala with very substantial shares of women and children who come to the US borders seeking asylum. They're very different than what all the machinery had been designed to deal with before, particularly the machinery on the border which was all aimed at regulating young men who were labor migrants. We have an immigration system now confronting a difficult phenomena, one that's quite demanding in terms of our humanitarian responsibilities and quite demanding bureaucratically, that the system is entirely unequipped for. Behind that you have a statutory framework that is badly out of date, and looming over it, this enormous enforcement machinery that remains in place, and that is growing under the Trump administration. Sorry to have gone on a bit, but that sets the scene for where we are coming in really the beginning of the Trump administration.

Serena Allen:

Right. Definitely, and I think, I mean, not just the brief history. I'm sure that it goes back beyond that, and it is much more complicated. But I appreciate you simplifying it to set a firm foundation for us to be able to discuss this on. I wanted to talk quickly about an article you wrote for the LA Times in February of last year, 2019, and just ask a question on one of the things you said there. You were saying how, and you just described that spending on border security has been escalating for a quarter century to the mission effect and a decade of expanding the number of detention beds also hasn't worked. I was wondering if you could define hasn't worked. What do you mean by that? Are there more immigrants coming and more immigrants being attracted, the human rights issues are surrounding the immigrants, people who are allowed asylum here, or? Just expand on that for viewers at home who only really hear about this in the news from one side or the other?

Roberto Suro:

Sure. This relatively new migration really dates to 2014, the Obama administration had the first experience of it, of this Northern Triangle migration of asylum seekers and a lot of young families and a lot of children. The current immigration system doesn't have a logical channel for those people to apply to. Really, the only door they can knock on is the asylum system which is a very narrow boutique product designed for people who are fleeing persecution and manage to come to either our borders or an airport and seek protection. It's designed for individual... each case has to be decided individually, and it's almost a judicial process. You almost have to go through a trial where you prove your worthiness. It was never designed or meant for any

kind of large scale processing, or really it's not adapted to dealing with a situation where an entire part of a country or a large population is being displaced all at once.

We've got these people coming and there's no easy way to deal with them. The system that we've got requires a lengthy process and multiple hearings, and they have rights to present their cases. The government has its obligation to question evidence and determine whether or not these people are worthy or not, as we said, on sort of an individual basis of, are the circumstances that drove you from home the kinds of circumstances we recognize? Even that definition is subject to dispute and subject to change from one administration to another. It's a very bad system for dealing with thousands of women and children who show up all at once.

So, what have our government's done, starting with the Obama administration? This is true also in Europe and Australia, other countries that are facing large numbers of asylum seekers. The argument goes as follows to build the policy construct. In this stream of people, there are some people who are worthy, who we want to protect, but there are a lot of people with weak claims. They want asylum, but really they're labor migrants, or really they're just trying to get with family and they should apply through another channel if those doors were open. Or they're entirely fraudulent, they're just trying to game us. Our system can't weed them out without choking. Currently, under the Trump administration, the backlog in the immigration courts has doubled to a million cases. The wait time now is in excess of 800 days for a hearing. The system just has collapsed under the numbers.

What do you do? The Obama administration adopted this policy quite explicitly, which was to send a message. Essentially, it's a deterrence policy where you say, "If you're going to try to apply for asylum, it's going to be a long and difficult process. It's going to be hard to get here, and when you get here, the process is difficult and your chances of success are not great. If you've got a weak claim or certainly if you've got a fraudulent claim, stay home and we'll..." the Obama administration said, "We will create channels for children in particular. We'll try and find ways to get you here that don't require a difficult and dangerous, often criminalized, trip through Mexico to our border." But the basic policy in the United States and Western Europe now towards these large numbers of asylum seekers is, unless you've got a really strong case, stay home. "We're going to make it hard. We're not going to make it easy on you," on purpose in order to weed out these claims that should never come before us in the first place. How's that working out? Well?

Serena Allen:

Not well I guess.

Roberto Suro:

Well, if the purpose is just, let's take it by whether the policies are achieving their stated aims. The stated aim is to not see these surges of thousands of immigrants at a time arriving at our borders asking for asylum. It's to discourage that and deter it, prevent it. If that's the measure, we saw a surge in 2014, we saw another surge in 2016. President Trump took office 2017. There was a period where he was threatening a lot of negative consequences building the wall,

a lot of things, there wasn't a big push. But by 2018, we saw a surge. He responded with a zero tolerance policy and separating families, quite dramatic. The numbers fell off, by fall of 2018 they were back. He escalated, the numbers fell off. Spring of 2019, the numbers came back. He escalated, the numbers fell off.

It looked for a while the numbers had been suppressed, just in the last week we've had about two to 4,000 people on a caravan cross from Guatemala into Mexico and were trying to make their way towards the US border. I'm not sure, as of a couple of days ago, they were wandering around in Southern Mexico and the Mexican authorities, under the new Trump policies, were trying to push them back. But if you look at this cycle, what you see is a cycle where you increase the deterrence policy, you heighten the punishment, it works for a while. The population that you're trying to deter seems to be able to absorb that and respond by coming back because the conditions that produce the migration haven't been addressed.

By those standards, and I could point to examples in Europe's management of migration that are similar, deterrence doesn't seem to work. Instead you get into these spirals where you escalate and you find a new level of deterrence and the migration resumes unless the circumstances dictating the push factors have somehow been addressed or other channels have been created. The danger that we've seen in the United States and in Europe is that, for democracies it's a losing game. How mean can we be? How harsh can we be? How much fright, how much fear, how much physical suffering and we impose before our own laws and values and court systems step in? I think it's a losing game.

Serena Allen:

Definitely. It seems that it's not a long-term solution for the amount of money that's being poured into it, and the amount of effort from, not only America, but international countries trying to fight immigration. It's, especially domestically, just, I think, one of a true nonpartisan issue because it seems to be very partied in certain ways. People have strong beliefs on either side, but I like, and we'll get to this in a second, how you explain just some of the possible solutions of where we could go with immigration.

But before we get there, I want to talk about the immigrants themselves. I think a lot of people, especially myself being privileged enough to grow up in America, never having to flee for a persecution or anything else, don't really understand why a lot of people are leaving their home country. You touch on your article, which for the listeners out there will be linked on our website, that there's three reasons to find a new country and that's money, love, and fear. I was wondering if you could briefly touch on an example of why each of those would make somebody want to flee their country and seek refuge here.

Roberto Suro:

Right. Let's start with one big distinction or try to get a distinction, which is most migrants. Most of the people who come to the United States every year come entirely voluntarily or very substantially voluntarily and come through legal programs. We admit well over a million people a year as legal permanent residents, hundreds of thousands as visitors, and an enormous flow

of foreign born in and out of this country, some who stay for a week, some who stay for the rest of their lives. As I said, most of it is done well within the bounds of the system, as rickety and outdated as it is, and very successfully. What we've seen increasingly in recent years, and the Northern Triangle migration is a very dramatic example of this phenomenon, is what's now generally being called displacement migrations. Where the lines between voluntary and involuntary become blurred and that don't fit the usual framework that we've operated under for humanitarian migrations.

The rules for refugees and asylum seekers were written during the Cold War and were fundamentally aimed at people fleeing government persecution. That's a real thing. But we know that in the world today, there are all kinds of things that force people to leave their homes. It's often not the acts of a government, but the lack of action by a government. For example, in Central America we see governments that are incapable of managing criminal violence, where we see transnational drug gangs exercising much more authority than national governments in certain areas. Where you have murder rates that are the highest in the world precisely because the government's ineffectual, not because it's persecuting people, but because it can't do anything and people are left to deal with the predations of criminals.

We're also seeing changes in the way that environmental circumstances drive people from their homes. We're used to catastrophes, a hurricane, an earthquake. All of a sudden Port-au-Prince is rendered uninhabitable. You can't send people back there because there's nowhere for them to live because of an earthquake or a hurricane. What we've seen more recently in recent years is the gradual environmental change that's associated with climate change, long-term drought for example. Going back to the example of Central America, there's been a five year drought on the western coast of Central America, the Pacific Coast of Central America that has ruined agriculture and created hunger in places that five, ten years ago were still vibrant and green. We see it in Central Africa. Many of those same places are subject to this kind of criminal violence.

In the middle of that, it becomes very hard to earn a living, economies collapse. People are forced from their land, they're forced into cities where they don't readily find employment, and they're much more vulnerable to criminal organizations. These things all become a stew of motives that push people out from their homes. Now is there somebody with a rifle and a bayonet saying, "You must leave your home or I'm going to kill you here right now?" No. Is it a rational choice to leave under those circumstances? Yes. Is it voluntary? Is it involuntary? Is it somewhere in between? Well, it probably is somewhere in between, but our immigration system doesn't recognize that kind of gray zone, you're either one or the other.

Our immigration system says we have three categories of entry. You can come to the United States, and most people do, because they have a relative who is a citizen or a legal, permanent resident and they sponsor you. The second biggest category is employment. Somebody wants you to work for them, an employer petitions for you. That's more than 90% of our total legal admissions. We have relatively small categories for humanitarian migrants. People who come seeking protection. You come for love, for family, for money, for a job, or for fear because you're a humanitarian migrant.

Our system, these are three separate doors. You can only go in one door. You got to be able to say, "Here's the family member who's sponsoring me. Here's the employer who's sponsoring me. or here are the conditions of fear that merit persecution." If you're going in the fear door, you can't say, "Well, also, really. I can't find a job." They go, "No, no, no, no. That puts you in the labor category. You're in the wrong line, buddy." You can't say, "There is no way to make a living. My kids were starving. There were these criminal gangs all over the place. It hadn't rained for five years. My sister lives in West Covina, so where am I going to go? I could go anywhere in the world. I'm going to go live with my sister." "No, no, no, no, that's a family migration. You're in the wrong line, buddy."

This is where we have a mismatch between the phenomena and our legal system for sorting people according to how we distribute admission. We have this category of people for whom these three motives, fear, love, and money are all mixed up, and we have countries where there are over 3 million people from those three countries living in the United States today, and there's a long history of migration from those countries to the United States. Some of it legal through family and employment channels, some of it through humanitarian channels, some of it irregular. But that big diaspora of people resident here is obviously a magnet to people who are being forced from their homes. Our system, we can describe these things and we can describe the motives and the behavior of the people that the policies are meant to manage, but the policies and the budgetary priorities are completely mismatched at this point.

Serena Allen:

Definitely. Yeah. And I mean, I think it's very interesting just to see a little bit more of the circumstances and how this is clearly an issue that America cares about deeply putting in billions of dollars every year to just try to mitigate some of these problems. We've talked a bit about how this came up and why it's not working and who the people are, but I want to hone in a little bit more into the economic side of things, particularly with some of your research on GDP, with both remittances and GDP compared to our proposed budget. You touch a bit on remittances, which, if I'm understanding correctly, is when an immigrant that is in America sends money home to their family or somebody else in the other country. Can you talk a bit about how that compares to the Northern Triangle's GDPs and exactly what's occurring there.

Roberto Suro:

In what is a universal and eternal behavior, immigrants who leave home go someplace and do well, send money back to the people they left behind. This is one of the aspects of immigration as a human behavior that's often overlooked. We think somebody leaves, they burn their bridges, they go to create a new life and they never remember where they came from. It's never been true, certainly not true in the United States. All of our ancestors, all of us who are of immigrant stock, which is a great majority of the American public, probably has an ancestor who sent remittances at some point in their immigration journey, and those remittances often go to help other people who then migrate later. The money can serve to pay the cost of transport for somebody who comes later.

One of the ways immigrant populations build, whether they're the Irish, or the Scots, or the Germans, the Italians, or the Greeks, or anybody else, is if one person comes, they do well, they send money, their family comes and joins them. The remittances do a number of things, they can help people live better where they are, and they can also finance migration. Usually these two things run together. It's no surprise that we see that happening in Central America. As I mentioned, there's a large population of people here. They send substantial remittances home to countries that are relatively poor, in some cases, as in El Salvador in particular, a very small country with a very large share of migrants in the United States, many of whom are very well established here. The remittance flow is a very substantial share of GDP in El Salvador. At times it's been over 20% of GDP, a very significant part where you've got large swaths of the population, the entire working class, not dependent on remittances to avoid starvation, but to maintain a level of well-being that is maybe one step ahead of poverty, or two steps ahead of poverty, or the difference between having medicine, and a roof, and being able to send children to school and not.

Serena Allen:

Right, the chance at a future, essentially, in a lot of ways.

Roberto Suro:

Yeah, I mean, and this is ongoing. We know that people who have been in the United States for 20 or 30 years keep sending money. This is a very well established process. It also creates a linkage between these two societies and when things go bad in a sending community that is receiving large shares of remittances from prior migrants, you have what migration scholars call a migration system. It is a network of connections and established patterns that facilitate migration. If five of your relatives, your uncle, a brother, a couple of cousins, the person down the street, have all moved to LA over the last 15 years, you're all of a sudden being threatened by gang members, you can't work, and things are going south in your community.

Those people here not only can send you money to finance the trip north, but they can tell you, "Here's how you do it, here's where to go, this is where to stop. Here's where to find the safe smuggling routes. Here's what you do at the border, and when you cross the border, here's how you get to our house. When you get to our house there will be a bedroom waiting for you and there'll be people helping you look for work and figure out your papers and deal with the United States in general." All of that facilitates migration. It lowers the cost of migration.

If you go back to the deterrence idea where the notion of the policy is to make it harder, to put people in a situation where they go, "What are my chances of succeeding and what's it going to cost me to try and get there? The US government has done all these things that are going to make it expensive and nasty. I won't go. On the other hand, this network that I have of friends and connections and financing actually lower the costs and lower the pain and increase my assumption of success." These two things counterbalance each other. We're trying to use public policy to get in the way of one of the most fundamental human behaviors, which is the

reunification of family, and the extension of help to family members, and the replication of behavior among family members.

You can imagine, I mean, you think of USC admission and alumni policies and the notion of the Trojan Family. The notion is, when the first person in your family comes to USC and goes to school here, that person relays knowledge, information about how it works, what it's like, what kind of place it is, and presumably also succeeds financially in a way which makes it more likely that other people from the same family will follow the same road.

Serena Allen:

Interesting. Definitely.

Roberto Suro:

We're talking about a really basic human behavior. How much money do you want to spend as a government to try and get in the middle of that? How mean are you willing to be to get in the middle of that?

Serena Allen:

Speaking of how much a government is willing to spend, I saw that the 2019 proposed budget in your New York Times article for Americans policy to fight immigration efforts was more than the combined GDP of two of the countries of the Northern Triangle. I was wondering if you could just touch on that and if that budget passed exactly as it was, and what currently stands for funding starting in 2019, excuse me.

Roberto Suro:

Yeah, I mean, the budget passed substantially, maybe not exactly as the president had proposed, but in orders of magnitude substantially it has increased. The proposals this year are to increase it more. The Trump administration is asking for significant expansion in the detention capacity, for example, and it's already shifted lots of money out of military budgets in the construction of the wall. That number now is much higher. With the basic argument there, the basic statistical artifact I created is that, what we spend on enforcement each year is more than the combined economies of two of these countries.

The point there is that, in dealing with the Northern Triangle, this one specific piece of the migration puzzle that right now is front and center and that has bedeviled the Trump administration just as it bedeviled the Obama administration, we're dealing with something really small. These are tiny countries. They're tiny in terms of population and they're tiny in terms of their economies. The scale and the number of people we're talking about coming to the United States in these emergency flows that have caused so much consternation are also quite small.

In 2019 when Trump did all kinds of things and it became a huge issue. I mean, if you consider that between... let's go back to the beginning of 2018, we had zero tolerance, which

means criminal penalties against anybody caught crossing the border without authorization. Somebody that nobody ever imagined was worth using the criminal justice system in that way, given the expense involved of using criminal penalties against people who, in the past, were just picked up and returned, or detained, or any number of ways to deal with them other than the criminal justice system. Separating children at the border, entering into these agreements with Mexico, turning people away, increasing detention space from 30 to 40 to 50,000 people a night, doing all these efforts.

For what? What's the total number of people who've come? I think it's less than half a million. All of '18 and '19, let's say it's 600,000. I don't think it'd get to that, maybe 700,000. In those two years, we admitted 2 million to 2 million and a quarter people in green cards. I mean, it's a chunk of folks, but it's not that many. We do 400,000 people a year with temporary low-skilled worker visas, 400,000 agricultural workers. Under Trump, that number's almost tripled. He's found it very convenient to keep the farmers and the golf course owners off his back by letting them bring in temporary workers. When you're talking about an enterprise, the US immigration enterprise, that allows people into the United States either permanently or on a long-term temporary permit at a rate of a million and a half, a million and three quarters a year, dealing with 200,000 folks is not that big a deal.

Serena Allen:

Right, particularly for the amount of money that's just going to these people.

Roberto Suro:

Especially the women and children. We've done this many times before, which was the point of one of those op-eds. The history of the way the United States has dealt with humanitarian migrations in the past has not been to use this system of individual adjudication, "Let's hear your cases one at a time." Even during the Cold War we were much more likely to say, "We'll take a whole class of people and just let them in with ad hoc decisions." Cubans, for 40 years, all you had to do was be a Cuban and get out, you were admitted. Soviet Jews for many years, as long as you were a Soviet subject and you were Jewish. For most of the time of that program, the individual requirements were quite low. When the numbers got larger, we decided we wanted to turn it down, we increased the scrutiny. Vietnamese, Hungarians, others, we've admitted in large numbers.

Here we're saying, "We're just taking the women and children." 150, 200,000 a year, almost all of them coming to be with males, either siblings, husbands, or fathers, almost all of them males as I said, who are in the United States, admitting them would serve any number of tools we have for a bulk admission, we just take them out of the system. To my mind is a much more effective, more humane, and cheaper approach than either saying, "You're going to have to sit in Mexico, we're going to have to turn you back. We'll have to figure out some way of convincing you not to come," or putting them in a court backlog where they wait two and a half years for their cases to be heard.

Serena Allen:

Definitely, it's very interesting just trying to cut the problem with the policies before they can even really expand and build up a bunch of costs overall for American taxpayer dollars. Before we touch on solutions a little bit more, I want to go to a question from one of our high school students. This is from Sammy Barr in McCallie School in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Sammy wants to know about specifically how we hear of US immigration policy as negative in regards to countries viewed more as politically unstable, and his examples are Mexico or Syria. "Rarely is immigration discussed in regards to more stable countries such as Canada. Does American policy differ for immigrants depending on the country and if so, how does it differ?"

Roberto Suro:

Well that's an interesting and difficult question. Our immigration system does have a system that distinguishes, to some extent, among countries and they are very antiquated dating from 1965 and fiddled with, but never substantially changed since then. A system of annual ceilings on the number of people per country. These aren't so much political decisions, as it turned out, as they are matters of volume. The intent was that you don't get a ton of people from one country. For countries where there's been a lot of migration, you have very long waiting times, for example, for family visas. That has a number of perverse effects. I mean, one of which is, it encourages people to come here by other channels.

In terms of the humanitarian flows I think he's referring to, and maybe a larger question. Do we have a bias against Mexicans? Interesting question. Mexicans in the United States have been heavily racialized. The idea of unauthorized migration has become heavily racialized, very clearly associated with Latinos and specifically Mexicans viewed in a negative way, viewed as a threat, portrayed darkly in most of the media. Certainly subject to a lot of polemics.

On the other hand, there are some 11 million people born in Mexico now living in the United States, and for the most part, they're doing fine. I mean, they've come here probably half of them out of status, but they've made homes, raised families, gotten work, incorporated into their communities, paid taxes, done reasonably well. The unauthorized are a lingering challenge in a lot of ways, both especially for the people and for the government and society. Was there a race bias in the fact that for 20 years we've debated what to do about these people, primarily Mexican who are out of status, who live amongst us, work amongst us, raise their family amongst us, but we've never allowed into our civic membership? Certainly there was a racial aspect of that. Certainly, the result of the stalemate has been for them to be left in this excluded category which is racialized.

Or you come to the humanitarian way... is some of that same race bias visible in the way people who are opposed to generous policies towards the Central Americans? I mean, does it operate there? I think you have to suppose. The history of immigration policy in the United States has never been far from race. It's always been a central factor and it remains so, maybe less explicitly than in the past, when we've had explicit racial laws. The great change in 1965 was trying to eliminate race as a measure of worthiness. But as our questioner notes, well,

nobody looks down on immigrants from Canada. Well, what is it about Canadians? They're very much like white Americans. Is that what lowers the barriers? Yeah, these are potent questions.

President Trump, very explicitly, started a discourse about Muslims, and very specifically, and very explicitly, and quite harshly has argued that people from Muslim countries per se, because they are countries where the populations are overwhelmingly Muslim, should not be admitted to the United States. The equation of Islam with terror is something that he is quite explicit about saying. He believes you have to equate these two things. That's added a level of both attempted policy, most of these policies have been struck down, but ongoing political rhetoric about immigration that certainly is changing the way people think.

Serena Allen:

Definitely. Yeah. It's very interesting. Great question, Sammy. I also want to quickly ask you, I know that there's a lot of, I think, listeners who are probably thinking the same thing. But a constant thing people say in response to immigration is that you can't let everyone in, our economy just can't support letting everyone in. I was wondering if you could respond to that and basically what you think of people who use that as their main argument against some of these immigration efforts.

Roberto Suro:

Well, I mean, there are a relatively small group of people who argue for no borders and no immigration system, who believe that the nation state is obsolete, that we live in a global commons and that everybody should be free to migrate wherever they want to. That is still a relatively... it is a minority view and a very idealistic view that I think is very much on the fringes of the policy debate. People who argue that our current system is wrong in a lot of ways and that its emphasis on enforcement is wrong, and who want to do a way with a lot of the enforcement bureaucracy and a lot of the most punitive aspects of the enforcement bureaucracy, and who favor much more open policies. But I think the argument, for the most part, about immigration policy until now, and I say until now, because we are becoming a very polarized country. Right now as we speak, this conversation is taking place during the impeachment trial, I believe, becoming polarized by the minute now, where people are being pushed to extreme views.

But absent that, if we ever pull back from that kind of polarization, the argument isn't about let everybody in versus make sure everybody stays out. It's about how many people and what kinds of people, and how do we admit them. The history is, we have been exceptionally good at that over a long period of time and it's become a matter of increasing disagreement and increasing polarization over the last 10 years especially, really looking back all the way to the 1990s. But at the same time we've become polarized about a lot of issues. You look at the balance of it, over the last 50 odd years we have undertaken a massive migration enterprise. In 1970 the foreign born comprised less than 5% of the total population. Today, the foreign born are somewhere near 14%. If you add their children, the children of immigrants and the immigrants themselves are easily a quarter of our total population.

We're a country that, for all its problems, has remained fairly prosperous and we have avoided really wholesale internal warfare, even of the type that we saw at various points in the 20th century. Yes, our politics are polarized, but until a few years ago, we were muddling along, and dealing with things like the Great Recession. Things could have been better. The recession, things could have been done to prevent its severity or reduce its severity, to recover faster. I'm not saying things are great. I'm not saying we've avoided racial hierarchy, that we've remedied all of our problems. But we undertook a wave of migration that fundamentally changed the character of our population that was accompanied with a fundamental change in the nature of our economy. We went from an industrial economy to a post-industrial economy, to an information economy, and for the most part did it pretty well.

Serena Allen:

I'd say so, definitely.

Roberto Suro:

Hey, we've managed migration okay.

Serena Allen:

Right, and it's overall just a huge part of, I mean, America as a whole. That's, how the rest of the world views us, how many of us view ourselves as this giant melting pot of people. I think you pose really interesting points there. My final question here and how we're ending all of our podcast is basically a bit of a summary on everything we're saying here, but also more so your opinion. I know for most of this we've been keeping to just mostly strict facts on what's working and what hasn't been working. But I'm wondering, what is your opinion on how we can better approach immigration from a nonpartisan lens to better allocate American tax dollars?

Roberto Suro:

Well, the first change has to be in the way we talk about it. Because the way we're talking about it now is very much else reduced to a zero sum game. You're either going to win or you're going to lose. It's portrayed immigration writ large as this fundamental threat to national identity, and the idea of going back, and in the some minds, going back to a country that was 80% white as opposed to 60% white is being offered as an alternative. On the other side, it's not clear what the alternative narrative is about what our national destiny is going into the rest of the 21st century or how we should formulate a national identity, or what it means to be an American.

Immigration is always, as a lot of other policy, is about who we want to be as a people. Migration brings that to the surface in a very simple, very clear way because is it people like us? Is it people who are not like us? Who we're going to let in, and who are we not going to let in? But at heart, it's a question about who we are. Right now, that's not a question that we as a nation are dealing with in a constructive way. It's become part of a very harsh and very ugly argument that divides us. If we can find some common ground about who we want to be,

managing migration is not that hard and it's certainly not expensive. Something that we should have mentioned a long time earlier since budget is a primary concern of this discussion.

The migration system on the whole is self-financing through fees. People who seek to come here as migrants, anybody seeking any migration benefit, even citizenship, people who've been here for 20 years as legal permanent residents and are seeking to become American citizens and swear the oath, they pay for that. They pay for the processing. You pay for visas, you pay to convert from one kind of visa or another. If you're an employer, if you're a family member, if you're sponsoring somebody, you pay. The costs of running the migration system per se are quite minimal. What you don't pay for is enforcement. The expenses are all on the policing side of it, and-

Serena Allen:

So the tens of billions of dollars we've been allocating is just for trying to deter people from coming and enforcing the legality of it.

Roberto Suro:

Absolutely, yeah. The fees to become a citizen escalate. The Trump administration has raised them recently. There are arguments over whether they're unjust or not, and they're always in programs to provide fees for people who are financially needy, there are ways. You're not talking about huge amounts of money. Managing the migration system, it has been presented in budgetary terms. Immigrants are seeking a benefit for which they pay the government. They pay the government the cost of processing to receive that benefit. This is not hard. It's not rocket science to figure out what the categories are and figure out how to administer them. It's way easier than lots of other things that our national government is supposed to be trying to do. What's needed is an agreement over what the purposes are, how we benefit from it, what are we trying to accomplish and who benefits. How do you mix the benefits to employers, to employees, to the rest of us, to consumers. Those are more complicated questions.

As I said at the outset, one of the reasons this discussion has become so harsh, and fruitless, and bitter now is that we haven't had successful policy making for a long, long time. I'll end this on a personal note. I first started writing about immigration in 1975. Yes, that long ago folks. The policy problems that were evident then, the questions, what do we need to do? What needs to be fixed? What is the agenda? That hasn't changed. Frankly, I'm seeing that my career as an immigration scholar is likely going to end before those questions are answered. This is the problem, that the federal government has not been able to make policy on immigration. We have changed healthcare, we have changed education policy, we've changed foreign policy, we've changed all kinds of things fundamentally upside down and sideways over this same period of time, and repeatedly, and we have failed to really significantly address the structure of immigration policy in the last 20 years, even do maintenance fixes on it.

Serena Allen:

You just heard Roberto Suro talk about immigration and particularly the status of the Northern Triangle. Thanks for listening. To learn about more policy matters check out other episodes and if you enjoyed this one, share it with a friend. You can go to bedrosian.usc.edu/paycheck to read more on immigration, Professor Suro's work, or to provide feedback and request topics for future episodes. The Policy Paycheck is sponsored by the Bedrosian Center, an applied research center with the Sol Price School of Public Policy at the University of Southern California. A big thank you to Aubrey Hicks, executive director of the Bedrosian Center, Corey Hedden and his team at the Price Video Services, and Jordan Williams, the designer of the Policy Paycheck logo.