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Location: Richard B. Russell Library for Political Research and Studies, Athens, GA
Moderator: Jan Levinson, Monica Pereira

Immigration: What’s the Problem?
Report by: Jan Levinson

On Friday, January 15\textsuperscript{th} the Russell Forum for Civic Life in Georgia hosted the third event in its informal forum series. Fifteen participants, two moderators, and one recorder gathered in the Russell Library Auditorium to discuss the NIF issue guide “The New Challenges of American Immigration.”

In the opening moments of the forum moderators asked the group what brought them to attend the discussion. “I am an immigrant,” one woman began, telling the group that her family emigrated from Korea in search of greater diversity and opportunity. Another man, a student at UGA, described his work with international students on campus. Others expressed their interest in workers’ rights, the impact of immigration on schools and local governments, experiences gained from living abroad, and concern for political refugees. From there, the group moved into a discussion of stakeholders. “Who does immigration affect?” prompted one of the moderators. After a few minutes of responses – children in school, corporations, immigrants, tax payers – they came to a simple solution: immigration affects everyone in the United States.

The forum unfolded as moderators led the group through a deliberation of three approaches proposing solutions to the challenges of immigration:

\textbf{Approach 1:} America’s Changing Face – Is there Too Much Difference? Proponents of this approach see immigration as a looming identity crisis which threatens to break the bonds of unity that define America.

\textbf{Approach 2:} A Nation of Immigrants – Remembering America’s Heritage. Proponents of this approach
assert that immigration has been the backbone of America’s strength and that our country should continue to welcome newcomers despite the costs.

**Approach 3: A Matter of Priorities – Putting Economics First.** Proponents of this approach contend that immigrants strain the public purse, compete for jobs, and exceed our carrying capacity. They say that we must restrict the number of newcomers, examining how their arrival affects the well-being of citizens already here.

The group first tackled Approach 1. Many in the group asserted that much of what makes America a unique country is its diversity and that everyone living in this country, with the exception of the Native Americans, are here as a result of immigration. Others pointed to the changing dynamic of immigration. They indicated that earlier generations of immigrants adopted the English language and American culture more readily than their modern counterparts. The conversation quickly turned to a discussion of what brings immigrants to the United States. Is it jobs? Freedom? Education? Overwhelmingly, the crowd indicated that people move here from other countries for the promise of all of these opportunities and not necessarily because they want to adopt American culture. Participants examined the recommended actions in approach one, such as the proposal to increase assistance to local governments in communities that have a disproportionate amount of immigrants. “If they mean positive support, like increased numbers of translators, and not punitive actions like increased law enforcement to scare off illegal immigrants, then I favor that action,” said one man. In general, most in the group seemed to empathize with the plight of immigrants and did not favor actions that would limit their continued ability to move to and live in the United States.

Approach two, which suggests that immigration is America’s heritage and that our country should continue to welcome newcomers despite the costs, brought to light some more tensions in the group. “The problem with letting anyone come in is that anyone can come in,” said one participant, referring to the security concerns of an open immigration policy. Another man said it simply did not make sense to have so many undocumented people in the country. Discussion on this point included the taxation of immigrants and their buying power in our economy. If many immigrants send their earnings to family members in their home countries, are they really contributing to America’s marketplace? Shouldn’t they have to pay income tax like everyone else? Others countered that more often than not immigrants take jobs that Americans don’t want and are filling a vital role in our economy. Further, they asserted that while illegal immigrants don’t pay income tax they do contribute to the taxes taken out of paychecks, investing in programs like social security that they will never be able to benefit from. Proponents of this approach offered that if Americans attempted to become more familiar with immigrants and their cultures, we would have an increased understanding of international relations and could perhaps begin to contradict outsider notions that American culture is simply consumerism, fast food, and reality television. Many expressed a strong feeling of obligation to political and climate refugees from other countries fleeing persecution or in some cases, the actual physical deterioration of their homes.

Having already broached many of the points in Approach 3 – “Putting Economics First” – the group continued to discuss immigrants in relation to the economic downturn. One participant said that sending back illegal immigrants was “shortsighted and false” stating that we live in a global economy
and immigrants help to make many American industries function. Others spoke out about the exploitation of undocumented workers and determined that, at least in part, the reason for such high rates of illegal immigration in America is because there are individuals and corporations who are willing to provide jobs to illegal aliens. The conversation branched into a question of what defines American culture – for native-born people as well as for immigrants. Do we still hear “America” and think of freedom and democracy?

“So why is this a tough issue,” one moderator asked in closing. Some answered that it pits a moral obligation against a legal issue. Many people who are concerned for the welfare of immigrants still have a real issue approving of illegal immigration – because it is against the law. Others saw immigration as a wedge issue – one that divides people along partisan lines and seems to offer very little middle ground. The group began to analyze the word “assimilation” – asking what expectations are inherent. What are we asking people to do when we use this word? And, does it imply an unequal power relationship? One participant suggested that we need a new way to describe what we want, perhaps “communion” or “connection” would better express what we hope to accomplish with newcomers to the United States. In the end, most in the group affirmed their belief that America is a culture of diversity and while the challenges of immigration are complex, and many people wear several different hats when considering the issue, we must continue to look for solutions that keep the door open for newcomers.

The Russell Forum for Civic Life in Georgia will take place on Friday, February 19th from 3:00-4:30PM in the Russell Library auditorium. The topic: The New Science of Food, Facing Up to Our Biotechnology Choices. For more information call (706) 542-5788 or visit http://www.libs.uga.edu/russell/rfclg/. The dates for all of our upcoming forums can be found on the Russell Forum Training and Program Calendar.

For more information on the Russell Forum for Civic Life in Georgia, visit http://www.libs.uga.edu/russell/rfclg, call (706) 542-5788, or email russellforum@gmail.com