

Opinion: Send California your anchor babies

By Joe Mathews

Anchor me, baby.

Because I find it impossible to write with restraint when politicians use babies to prey on prejudice and misinform the public in the service of winning votes.



Joe Mathews

That's the story of the Republican presidential contest, as Donald Trump and his opponents make xenophobic nonsense about "anchor babies" a top issue. I won't rehash here all the debunking of this phony idea that hordes of pregnant immigrants are coming here to have babies. Race-baiting bunk is a staple of America's presidential politics, and nothing I write will change that.

But when it comes to the babies part of anchor babies, I can't stay silent. I am 100-percent pro-baby. And I'm old enough to remember when politicians were, too, cooing at the diaper set instead of scapegoating them as a peril to the republic.

Unfortunately, mainstream media outlets are helping to spread the ignorance by portraying anchor babies as a "controversy," or "complex issue" (as the *L.A. Times* called it) when it is no such thing.

When it comes to babies—anchor or any other kind—the only issue we face is that we don't have enough of them.

Here's an invitation: If you think you have too many babies in your community, please buy tickets to California for them and their parents. We sure could use them.

Our state is facing a historic decline in its number of young children. According to USC, California had nearly 200,000 fewer children under age 10 in 2010 as it had in 2000, with the losses heavy in coastal counties. Why? Flat immigration, the high cost of living, and a birth rate that has dropped below the replacement level to maintain a population.

Guess what, America? The country's birth rate dropped below replacement in 2007 and hasn't recovered; the recession left us with a baby deficit of 2.3 million. Which makes immigrants and their babies a solution to our baby bust, not a problem. Indeed, serious presidential candidates should be offering plans to incentivize the arrival of more babies – and make them more successful grownups. After all, the biggest domestic challenge for this country is how a dwindling number of working-age people is going to support our growing population of retirees.

Yes, I know that Jeb Bush – whose own birth anchored him in presidential politics – is arguing that the real “anchor baby” problem involves so-called “birth tourism” by Asian families who come here to have babies and pick up a U.S. passport for them on their way back to their home countries. Media outlets have covered this “issue” for years in California regions with large populations of Chinese descent, especially the San Gabriel Valley, where I live. Isn't so-called birth tourism a trivialization of citizenship or an incursion into our communities, as Bush suggests?

Oh, please.

Getting citizenship has always required money in some form,

even if it's just to get here and make a life. This country is full of malls financed by foreigners here on a popular investor visa program. And what American could be opposed to tourism? In a terrific *Rolling Stone* story on birth tourism, one Chinese couple that came to L.A. to give birth sees a Laker game, visits Venice Beach, and shops at our outlet malls. We need as much of this sort of thing as possible.

The only problems with Chinese birth tourists are that there aren't enough of them (estimates are in the thousands) and that they head back to China instead of making their lives here. U.S. citizenship is seen as a form of insurance against instability back home by wealthy foreigners, and many of the U.S.-born Chinese babies won't retain their insurance past age 18, since China doesn't permit dual citizenship into adulthood. Here's hoping that, at that age, many of those babies will choose to remain Americans, study here, and become productive citizens whose taxes pay my Social Security.

To be fair, presidential candidates aren't the only ones unnecessarily raising alarms about babies. Federal law enforcement challenges pregnant mothers flying into the country about their intentions, even though birth tourism is legal. The feds even raided maternity hotels in Southern California as part of an investigation into the finances of birth tourism businesses. Given the national baby shortage, perhaps the feds should stick to their usual pursuits, like prosecuting marijuana activity and collecting metadata.

Strip away rhetoric and rationalizations, and what you have is an unreasoning fear of babies. After all, babies and their immigrant parents represent everything this country needs – investment, risk-taking, striving for a better life.

So if you have a problem with these babies, you have a problem with the American dream. Maybe you should consider emigrating.

Love it or leave it, baby.

Joe Mathews is California and innovation editor for Zócalo Public Square, for which he writes the Connecting California column.