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Brookings Cafeteria Podcast: Can President Trump implement his immigration agenda?

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DEWS: Welcome to the Brookings cafeteria the podcast about ideas and the experts who have. I'm Fred Doo's during the 2016 presidential campaign and since he became president Donald Trump has called for policies aimed at limiting the inflow of immigrants and refugees into America and deporting as many undocumented persons as possible. He's proposed building a new wall along the U.S.-Mexico border hiring more immigration and border patrol personnel and implementing new restrictions on entrance from certain Muslim majority countries. A lot of ink has been spilled and words exchanged about these issues from the courts to the streets to cable TV. But there is an important question that stands alongside the politics the economics and the law and that is could the Trump administration and the U.S. government actually implement any of these policies. Joining me in the studio today to address the implementation challenges of these policies is Senior Fellow Elaine Kamarck. She is the founding director of the Center for Effective Public Management and author of The Brookings Institution press book why presidents fail and how they can succeed again. Stay tuned during the interview for another installment of Wessell's economic update. You can keep up to date with the Brookings Podcast Network on Twitter at policy podcasts. And now on with the interview. Elaine welcome back to the Brookings cafeteria.

KAMARCK: Thank you Fred.

DEWS: You've written a new paper with John Hudak and Christine Stenglein. Just published by the Center for Effective Public Management and it's titled Hitting the wall: On immigration campaign promises clash with policy realities. So it strikes me as the clash between what was said and what's really possible in terms of implementation.

KAMARCK: Well that's right. I mean we took Donald Trump's campaign promises seriously in this. This is not a paper that you know comes down on either side of his campaign promises but we just looked at how they would be implemented and what's going on now. And one of the problems we find is that many of his promises are exceedingly difficult to actually do. And it's not even a matter of money it's not a matter of political will it's just that some of his assumptions behind those promises were based on faulty perceptions of what was happening.

DEWS: Well we're going to walk through the four questions that you explore in the paper. I just want to mention those at the top and then we'll go in each one. Those are building the wall. The next one is the Department of Homeland Security. Hiring more personnel for the Customs and Border Protection Agency and also ICE which is the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency that's number two. Number three is what Donald Trump has called Extreme vetting of refugees. And number four is how to measure the success of any of these. So let's go into these and turn on the wall. We first ask you, do you think candidate Trump and now President Trump really meant that he wants to build a literal wall where a wall doesn't already exist from the Pacific to the Gulf of Mexico along the U.S.-Mexico border?

KAMARCK: Well it seems as if he does mean that. I mean he continually repeats it. OK. And he's got some of his people at the Department of Homeland Security looking into it doing feasibility studies. The last time people thought about this was in the George W. Bush administration and they talked about a virtual wall because of the physical difficulties of building an actual wall. And that project called SB I know that died of rather you know quiet death just because it was costing millions and millions of dollars and

nobody including by the way the Republicans in Congress thought we were getting our money's worth for it. So there's sort of two questions right. One is can you build a physical wall and the other question is is this worth the money that it takes. Are there better ways to fight illegal immigration.

DEWS: On the second question is it worth the money. You cite various cost estimates of building a wall from the sea to the Gulf. How would the Department of Homeland Security even study the cost effectiveness what does that kind of look like?

KAMARCK: Well years ago when SBI Net died or when it was in trouble Congress said to the department look why don't you do a cost benefit analysis of how much the wall would help versus other tactics for fighting illegal immigration. And that process never really began because the sequester happened and the sequester cut out the money for that. So the first thing we don't really know is is the wall worth the money or is the money better put in say tracking people who come here and overstay their visas which seems to be a much bigger course of illegal immigration than people coming over the Mexican border.

DEWS: In fact in the past few years I've seen data that suggests that there has been a return of immigrants migrants from Mexico back across the U.S. border to the south instead of coming to the north.

KAMARCK: Well that's right. I mean you know part of the thing that's amusing about our sort of misleading about Donald Trump's campaign promises is that in fact over time the number of illegal immigrants has declined and that the number of Mexicans as a proportion of that total has declined. So put it this way. He ran a campaign that led people

to believe that we were being overcome with immigrants illegal immigrants from Mexico and refugees from Syria all of whom were committing crimes and none of that is true.

DEWS: Another really interesting point that you make in the paper is that if this project were to proceed it would be a massive public works project it would obviously need a lot of laborers to build it. And where would those laborers come from.

KAMARCK: Well that's kind of the funny part of this right is that even perfectly mundane projects these days use a lot of immigrant labor. And frankly they use a lot of illegal immigrant labor. So if you're sending everybody home you're going to create a shortage in the labor force when the Department of Labor measures people who are engaged in the construction trades. There's a higher percentage of immigrants in construction trades than there are of native born Americans. So when the legal ones go home and the illegal ones go home you could find yourself with quite a labor shortage. Now even if all of the challenges the implementation that we've discussed so far can be overcome. There's this additional question which is at the intersection of not only politics but at the law.

DEWS: And that's eminent domain. Can you explain what that issue is all about?

KAMARCK: Yeah eminent domain refers to the government's right to take land essentially from private individuals. And a lot of the border that a wall would be built on is in Texas and much of this is in private hands. People you know individual families own it sometimes for generations. And as you can imagine the Republican Party especially has been really angry over the whole concept of eminent domain for many years. This and the last time the federal government tried building along the border. Congress passed a

law against eminent domain. Now it held up in the courts. But the fact of the matter is that the Republican members of Congress particularly are really opposed this. Not to mention Republican voters like the ones in Texas who voted for Donald Trump. So if he started taking large swaths of land from individual citizens I think he'd have a political hornet's nest on his hands.

DEWS: We're going to move on from the wall to some of the other issues. But first I want to tell listeners that this new paper hitting the wall is adding to the body of research that already exists at Brookings. You can go to our Web site and find out only in this paper but if you search for the work of Vonda fell by Brown and others you will find more research and commentary about issues related to the war in the U.S.-Mexico border. So moving on to issues of border protection and Immigration Enforcement one of the factors that comes out is those two agencies that you focus on ice which is immigration and customs enforcement and see B. P Customs and Border Protection are both agencies under the Department of Homeland Security could you very briefly give us some background on the Department of Homeland Security and its scope its size these kinds of issues.

KAMARCK: Well it was founded in 2003 and it was really a combination of 22 different federal agencies and the biggest piece of that department are the agencies that have traditionally worked at the border. OK so Immigrations and Customs. The interesting thing for our conversation here is that beginning in 2000 and seven you have an enormous increase in the number of agents on the border both ice and CBP and that rises dramatically including into the Obama administration. In other words it starts in the Bush administration but it continues in the Obama administration and then levels off in 2013

and 14 and declines slightly. So there has already been a big increase. Now President Trump would like to see more agents but it's unclear if the department has the capacity to use those agents. Clearly more is always better but he's talking about numbers in the 15000 range between two agencies between the two agencies. Yeah. And that may be problematic. There is not a pool of people who are interested who have law enforcement background who can pass a rigorous security check because after all the last place she wants somebody who's a terrorist is on the Border Patrol right and who is willing to live in rural dusty Texas near the border. It's a very unpopulated place and for good reason right. So if you take those three together the hiring and there's a long lag in higher in which the department has done a much better job at shortening. But does it lead for a reason. You have to thoroughly investigate these people and they have to have the right background law enforcement or military is the usual background and then be willing to take the jobs and that pool is just simply not very big.

DEWS: Let's take a short break for another installment of Wessel's economic update.

WESSEL: I'm David Wessel and this is my economic update. Of all the many economic statistics that the U.S. government churns out. One of the most important may be one of the least well understood productivity the amount of stuff we produce for every hour of work productivity growth is the magic elixir of rising living standards. Productivity growth is the reason we have more goods and services than our grandparents did even though we don't work more hours. Productivity growth is key to how fast the economy and wages can grow over time. Economists sometimes talk about the speed limit rate of economic growth how fast the economy can grow over time without generating

unwelcome inflation. That's simply the sum of two numbers. Productivity growth and growth in the labor force. Now the best guess these days that the economy can grow at about 2 percent a year more or less to get more than that will need faster productivity growth. First a bit of history. Productivity grew rapidly for a quarter century after World War II so rapidly that living standards doubled in a single generation.

Then it slowed sharply around 1973 for another quarter century. Then we had a welcome surge in productivity growth for about a decade. Between 1995 and 2004. But unfortunately that didn't last. Productivity growth has been painfully slow for the past couple of years. And even if it perks up a bit say to the pace that the Federal Reserve expects it'll take more than 70 years. Close to three generations for living standards to double. So a few questions one should we believe the statistics. After all isn't that hard to add up all the goods and services and the ever changing economy. The improvements in health care the way the iPhone has replaced cameras and maps and all that. Short answer we are mis measuring productivity. We can and should do better but it's hard to believe that we are mis measuring it so much that we're mistaking recent trends too. Are we doing to a generation of lousy productivity growth. Some experts think so. Robert Gordon at Northwestern University say the wonders of the Internet and the iPhone aren't nearly as potent economically as the arrival of electricity and cars. But I was cheered to see recently that a couple of other economists Dan Sichel and Lee Branstetter are much more optimistic. They think the official data don't properly record all the seeds of innovation and investment that are being planted today and they expect them to pay off in the near future and more efficient health care in smarter robots in e-learning that will make education better. 3. Wait a minute. Doesn't faster productivity growth mean fewer



jobs. After all the more efficient a factory the fewer hours of labor it needs. Yes productivity growth can often eliminate jobs in industries that are harnessing technology most aggressively for an economy as a whole. However history suggests productivity growth is actually good for employment as workers or their kids move to new industries and higher incomes mean more spending and more jobs.

That's what happened when we mechanized farms and workers moved to factories. But could this time be different. Could we run out of jobs now as robots and artificial intelligence take over. We could. I don't think that's the likely outcome. But that brings us to a question for when productivity grows. Does everyone share in the prosperity. The answer is emphatically no. And that's a big issue. To quote from a new paper by David Otter, an MIT economist, many of the new jobs created by an increasingly automated economy do not offer a stable sustainable standard of living. While many of the highly paid jobs the ones that are strongly complemented by advancing technology are out of reach to workers without a college education. In other words the nature of recent productivity growth is widening the gap between winners and losers in the job market. And finally five were rolled up. Public policy plays in all this. The truth is we don't know with certainty how to increase the pace of productivity growth but there is good reason to think we'd be better off with more investment in basic research and infrastructure better education a tax code that does more to encourage investment and less to encourage game playing continued immigration of the best and the brightest around the world. Smarter regulation. But we also know that technology and globalization can boost prosperity as a whole.

But lately the fruits of that prosperity have gone disproportionately to folks at the top and we haven't done enough to help individuals and communities that are adversely affected by this rapid change. As my colleague the former Fed Chairman Ben Bernanke put it recently. Sometimes growth is not enough. I'm David Wessel.

DEWS: You can listen to more from David Wessel on our soundcloud channel. Now back to my interview with Elaine Kamarck. Want to review those numbers on the lag in hiring I think they're fascinating for an ice agent. The average hiring time was 11 161 days in 2012 that's been decreased to 212 days for CBP. Average time was 505 days to hire new personnel in 2012 and that's dropped to 221 days are set for 2015. And then you're right. Each agency takes about seven months to hire new agency.

KAMARCK: And that's again because of the background checks. Right. I mean the background checks it's been a longstanding management problem in the government that we don't have enough people to do the security clearances. And of course in the Bush administration they outsource that to a private company. That's how we got a lot of problems as a result of that. So this really is a problem of getting the security clearances done and getting them done quickly and frankly even if you add more resources it's still very time consuming thing you know think about interviewing everybody that you know. Right. All your neighbors right. Going through all your financial records making sure that you're not vulnerable to blackmail by a terrorist organization or by a foreign power. I mean it really is quite extensive.

DEWS: And then there's the issue of if you actually have to pay all these new agents the president trumps two executive orders that directed the Department to hire these additional agents references or uses the phrase subject to available appropriations.

There's the rub I suppose yeah there's the rub. What would it cost to hire 15000 additional agents and is there money in the federal government to do that.

KAMARCK: It would cost an enormous amount of money. And in fact such that it would exceed current budgets by large amounts. So far Congress has not seemed very interested in doing this. OK. In other words a Republican Congress hasn't been very interested in doing this. And again part of this is that nobody really knows what's the most effective thing to spend money on. I think that President Trump has raised this issue you know sufficiently that he could probably get large increases. But what we don't know and the reason I think there's going to be continuing congressional resistance is we don't know where to spend the money. We don't know where it is best spent. And this whole notion of a physical beautiful ball as President Trump talks about it people who do this work are very skeptical that that's the magic bullet.

DEWS: Well let's move on to the question of refugees. The administration very early in its time issued what it has sometimes called and it's not called a travel ban from select Muslim majority countries. That was stopped by the courts. There was another executive order issued that also has been set up by the courts and we heard the rhetoric from Canada. Now President Trump on refugees about extreme vetting. So this question of extreme vetting comes up a lot. And when I read your paper I learned about something called the UNHCR the UN High Commissioner for Refugees eight six five four three two process. What is the eight six five four three two process?

KAMARCK: Well the current protocols for getting a refugee into the United States involves reviews by eight U.S. federal government agencies six different security databases five separate background checks for biometric security checks three separate

in-person interviews two interagency security checks. The entire process is conducted abroad before people are here and can take up to two years. Now that's pretty extreme. I'm sure you can make it probably more extreme but it kind of belies the notion that the United States was just letting in people that we don't know anything about. That's just not the case when it comes to refugees.

DEWS: And on this podcast I've talked to a lot of other experts about the refugee crisis and solutions to the refugee problem. I encourage listeners to go hear those. It's very interesting and challenging problem in your paper. You actually identify a perhaps better way to spend all the attention and resources when it comes to thinking about refugees and who we live in rather than just a blanket ban or increased vetting if you will on certain Muslim nations. What is the alternative to that?

KAMARCK: The alternative is to add resources to the visa process at the beginning that we really are overrun in many embassies around the world with just too many people wanting visas. The lines are long. The State Department officials are usually young brand new foreign-service officers without a lot of experience. We increased our capacity to check people out before we give them a visa and then we increased our capacity to follow people on time limited visas once they're in the United States. We could probably increase our security a lot more. The refugee process is already a very difficult and bureaucratic and time consuming process as it should be and very few people actually get in the country. In fact the Cato Institute which is hardly a liberal or Democratic mouthpiece estimates that an individual in the United States has a one in over \$3.6 billion chance of being killed by a refugee and a terror incident. I mean we just don't have enough refugees here right to be a threat. And I think when Trump was on the campaign trail he was

conflating the situation in Europe with a situation here in Europe. Refugees are coming over land borders and they're coming in great numbers and they're sneaking into Europe et cetera. We have two oceans you know and two friendly countries and we just don't have the influx of refugees that they have our security holes actually turn out to be in the visa process and in the number of people that we admit to the United States perfectly legally and then who stay here and sometimes commit crimes. In the case of the 9/11 hijackers some of them are terrorists. OK we need to be a lot better on those aspects of it. And the refugee crisis is you know serious but it is not a security concern in the way that I think the president has made it out to be.

DEWS: Well you write in the paper that quote you have to admit that President Trump is right on one point. No one knows exactly how many unauthorized immigrants there are in the U.S. unquote. So some sources are cited 11 million some 13 million. But does the number really matter if it's 11 or 13 million. And what's the most important thing we should understand sort of from a process an implementation point of view about the undocumented population in the U.S.

KAMARCK: Well I think the most important thing to understand is that we don't really know how many undocumented immigrants are here but there are things that we do know we do know for instance how many immigrants we removed from the United States for criminal activity. OK. And those are large numbers starting in 2000 2010. More than half of everybody we've removed has a criminal record. And if you think about it for a minute if you sneak into this country illegally you are not apt to volunteer to people that you're here illegally. Right. And you don't want it. No you try to hide that. Well how does it become known. It becomes known when you get in trouble with the law. So we deport

actually a lot of criminals and it just makes sense that those are the ones that come into the system and that we manage to find. So the notion that the president perpetuated in his you know in his campaign that somehow we had an overflow of immigrants and they were committing crimes and we were letting them stay here just isn't borne out by the numbers. So what's going to have to happen is the reason the numbers are important is that the first number of the total number we don't really know although we do have methods of estimating but there are two other numbers that we do know with some precision how many immigrants are removed from the United States and how many are removed for criminal behavior. And I think in a couple of years Donald Trump is going to have to show improvement in those numbers. That may be difficult to do.

DEWS: It strikes me as this issue of measuring success is going back to the to the proposition in the title of this paper the clash between campaign promises and policy realities you can say anything you want to say on the campaign trail but when you're governing you need to implement policies that you can measure so. And it's also probably ties into your book why presidents fail and how they can succeed again. How how does a president like Donald Trump in this administration demonstrate success in these areas or can they.

KAMARCK: Well I mean I think in this area Donald Trump is going to have to show that he is removing significantly more undocumented people than Obama did and Bush did before Obama. Now since those numbers were fairly high and going up and then they leveled off a little bit. And the reason they leveled off was that after the big U.S. recession a lot of the immigrants went home because after all the reason they come here is jobs and when there's no jobs. People go home. So we we've had we've seen some decreases

in those numbers already. And the question is can Donald Trump find enough to make those numbers look spectacular or does he have to admit that in fact Bush and Obama before him were actually doing the job.

DEWS: Well the paper is titled hitting the wall on immigration. Campaign promises clash with policy realities. It's a fascinating paper. Elaine I want to thank you for sharing your time and expertise today. Thank you for having me. You can learn more about market research and download this paper on our Web site.

KAMARCK: Thank you.

DEWS: Hey listeners, want to ask an expert a question? You can by sending an e-mail to me at [BCP@brookings.edu](mailto:BCP@brookings.edu), if you attach an audio file I'll play it on the air and I'll get an expert to answer and include it in an upcoming episode. Thanks to all of you who have sent in questions already.

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