
Keeping the Promise: Immigration Proposals from the Heartland

Report of an Independent Task Force

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Executive Summary

Immigrants long have been part of the American landscape, reflecting our country's values and traditions. During the last decade the Midwest has seen a resurgence of its long-established tradition of immigration. Nine of twelve Midwest states had foreign-born populations that grew faster than the national average during the 1990s. These immigrants are preventing population decline, reinvigorating economic growth, and contributing to cultural diversity.

Unfortunately, most immigration discussions tend to overlook the heartland of the country and our long and continuing experience with immigrants. We in the Midwest believe that immigration here, important in itself, also is a microcosm for what is occurring across the country. We thus believe that our observations, conclusions, and recommendations resonate nationwide.

Why Immigration and Why Now?

Domestic and Global Changes

Much of the economic, social, and political vitality of the United States can be attributed to the contributions of previous waves of immigrants. Immigration, along with an effective system for managing it, will be even more crucial to the growth, success, and safety of U.S. society in the future for four reasons:

1. *Changing demographics*—an aging population coupled with growth in the numbers and diversity of the foreign-born population, which currently comprises 11.1 percent of the U.S. population
2. *Labor market projections*—an increase in net employment, including many jobs that require only short-term training, and an increase in the percentage of foreign-born in the workforce
3. *Regional integration*—deepening economic ties between the United States, Canada, and Mexico and increased regional and global labor mobility

4. *National security*—features that make the United States attractive to so many motivate others to try to harm it.

A Broken System

At present, the U.S. immigration system is burdened both by policy and implementation challenges. It is barely able to meet the commitments required by law and policy and is ill-prepared to address new challenges and mandates. Agreement that the system is broken may be the only point of consensus among many diverse stakeholders. The Task Force believes that immigration laws and policies are broken in four ways:

1. *There is an increasing disconnect between law and reality that undermines the rule of law, breeds disrespect for American values and institutions, and makes it more difficult to garner domestic support for immigration and advance U.S. values overseas.*
2. *Some immigration policies hamper rather than encourage economic growth, impeding responses to global economic changes and cyclical industry needs.*
3. *Immigration policies have not adequately addressed threats to national security.*
4. *Immigration integration policy is nearly nonexistent, especially at the federal level, leaving state and local governments to absorb the consequences of federally established immigration policy.*

Clarifying Policy Goals and Approaches

The Task Force sees the core goals of U.S. immigration policy as the following:

- To advance fundamental values of democracy, liberty, and human rights at home and abroad
- To promote the rule of law and equality under the law
- To promote economic competitiveness and growth

- To contribute to national security
- To strengthen American communities and families

The Task Force believes that the three existing channels for immigration—family reunification, employment-based immigration, and refugee admissions—can achieve these goals. However, comprehensive reforms, shaped to be consistent with other national priorities and policy initiatives, are necessary to do so. Immigration needs to be a matter of high national priority, central to U.S. prosperity and security in the twenty-first century.

The Task Force urges the administration to propose and the Congress to pass at the earliest possible date, comprehensive legislation realigning the Immigration and Nationality Act with national needs.

Without action the contradictions and pressures will only increase, as the undocumented population grows, more people die at the border, families remain separated, processing backlogs increase, workers are exploited, certain industries decry labor shortages, refugees languish in camps overseas, visa applications decline, scientific and medical research is delayed by visa complications, and potential terrorists try to take advantage of systemic vulnerabilities. Only through such legislation can the system regain its integrity and become a tool for responding to changing social, economic, and security realities.

The Immigration Landscape

The United States granted legal permanent resident status to approximately 1.1 million immigrants in 2002. Most were close relatives of U.S. citizens and permanent residents. It also admitted almost 28 million temporary visitors in 2002, ranging from tourists to students to religious workers. The undocumented population is estimated to have reached 9.3 million, with hundreds of thousands entering the United States illegally each year or violating the terms of their visas.

Overall, there is steady growth in permanent immigration, significant growth in illegal immigration, and a decline in both temporary visitors and refugee admissions. Combined with the increasingly diverse origins of today's immigrants and their settlement in both new

and traditional destinations, these trends pose major implications for the workforce, the educational system, state governments, American communities, and many other components of American society.

Growing the Economy

Today's economy is highly dependent on immigration, legal and illegal, temporary and permanent. Fourteen percent of the U.S. labor force is foreign-born. Immigrants contributed more than 50 percent of the nation's civilian labor force growth in the 1990s. They are concentrated in the job market at the low and high ends of the spectrum. The National Academy of Sciences has found that immigration "produces net economic gains for domestic residents."

The Task Force recommends that immigration be treated as a critical element of economic policymaking and national productivity. This would entail modifying and adding flexibility to the temporary and permanent employment-based categories in order to adjust to the economic changes of the last decade and be responsive to future trends and social realities. It also would entail ensuring sufficient numbers in the family preferences for those who qualify under the defined categories.

Lasting immigration reform requires an integrated and comprehensive response. Increased physical security and economic security are not mutually exclusive. The Task Force recommends the following:

- ***An earned legalization approach*** that enables the existing undocumented population to gain legal status in the United States over time, including pathways to citizenship for those who apply and qualify
- ***A properly structured temporary worker program to fill future labor market needs*** and safeguard against abuses and poor administration
- ***A greater focus on strengthening the U.S. economy through facilitation of travel and trade***, including consideration of U.S. VISIT's impact on cross-border communities and businesses

- ***Removal of unnecessary obstacles faced by businesses and workers that limit growth***, including (1) barriers to adjustment to permanent status for qualifying temporary workers, (2) delays in visa issuance for students and workers, and (3) caps on business visas
- ***Vigorous enforcement by federal and state governments of workplace protection and labor laws*** for native-born and immigrant employees alike
- ***Development of innovative job training programs*** to ensure that existing U.S. employees and recent immigrants are trained for high-growth job sectors
- ***Design and adoption of mechanisms that enable employers to comply with the law in their hiring practices***

Securing the Country

The September 11 attacks irrevocably changed American thinking regarding the link between U.S. immigration policy and homeland security. Immigration policies can no longer be separated from the imperative to secure the homeland. It is possible, however, to secure both the homeland and the rights of immigrants, visitors, and citizens while maintaining the nation's economic and social vitality. The Task Force recommends the following:

- ***The mobilization of immigration measures to support antiterrorism efforts*** through effective border controls, information-sharing and database integration, and aggressive investigation and intelligence-gathering, including international law enforcement cooperation
- ***Rejection of immigration measures that single out groups for differential treatment by nationality, ethnicity, or religion unless called for by specific actionable intelligence. However, extra caution should be used in taking such measures.***
- ***Secure but timely processing of visa applications***, which requires treating visa processing as a specialty occupation and developing strong partnerships with those who sponsor temporary visitors

Congress and the administration need to demonstrate political leadership in the following three areas in particular:

- *Acknowledging that security risks at U.S. borders cannot be completely eliminated without causing significant damage to vital interests and values.*
- *Building adequate protections and safeguards into visa and immigration adjudications* so that public confidence is restored and line officials can do their jobs with assurance and with the support of their superiors
- *Exercising aggressive oversight of immigration legislation and policies to ensure they are effective in combating terrorism.*

Strengthening Communities

To ensure success for newcomers and the native-born, immigration policy must address the integration of immigrants after their arrival. This is a two-way process involving daily interactions between immigrants and receiving communities as they adapt to each other over time and as newcomers gain the opportunity to participate fully in all aspects of American life. Explicit integration efforts are increasingly important due to the growth in the foreign-born population, their growing dispersal throughout the country, their growing diversity, and their increasing importance to the continued vitality and renewal of the U.S. economy and society.

The Task Force urges development of a national immigrant integration policy that aims to incorporate new Americans fully into the economic, social, and political fabric of the United States. Moreover, each state should designate a focal point for integration efforts.

The goals of an integration agenda should be the following:

- To encourage civic participation, including but not limited to naturalization
- To overcome known barriers to full incorporation into society such as limited English skills and health care

- To maximize effectiveness by developing partnerships with state and local governments as well as private sector employers, educational and religious institutions, unions, and community-based organizations
- To strengthen communities through outreach efforts to educate the native-born about immigrants and immigrants about the native-born

Providing the Necessary Infrastructure

Reforms are only as good as the ability to implement them. At present, enforcement of existing laws and implementation of immigration policies are uneven at best, promised services are not delivered, new mandates receive scant resources, information is not easily shared, and multiple actors, including the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and state governments, are playing key roles.

The Task Force recommends that proposals for immigration reform address organizational and implementation capacity as well as policy reforms.

DHS needs (1) sufficient funding and personnel to accomplish its service and enforcement missions in ways that advance broader policy goals, (2) a structure for coordination with other government agencies (or even state governments) dealing with immigration, and (3) a transparent and coherent approach (and single focal point) for developing and reviewing immigration policies more broadly and resolving interagency disputes.

The Task Force urges the administration and Congress to work together in finalizing and enacting backlog reduction plans, including adequate appropriations and infrastructure, in order to meet a six-month processing standard.

The number of pending immigration-related applications has reached 6.2 million. Backlogs undermine credibility in and support for the immigration system. They separate families for years or even decades,

create additional workload and delays in other areas of the system as people wait, and lead to lost business and research opportunities.

A Call to Action

Immigrants are part of this country's national character. They help preserve and advance the values and vitality of American society internally and around the world. They have been a key component of what has made U.S. democracy so resilient over time. Now and in the future, immigration will play a critical role in the United States' ability to adapt to global and domestic changes.

Presidential leadership is essential for progress in immigration reform. The Task Force urges a bipartisan commitment by the president and the Congress to make immigration reform, including integration strategies, a priority for action in 2005.

The president's statement of January 7, 2004, proposing a new temporary worker program and recent Congressional initiatives should be a springboard for a wide-ranging and urgent debate leading to comprehensive immigration reform.