

Immigration Reform Necessary for National Security

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Is there merit in President Trump's call for a merit-based immigration system for the United States?

Take two cases.

Rosa Gonzalez, a housekeeper from Honduras and a U.S. citizen, seeks to sponsor her aunt Mercedes Silva to immigrate to the U.S. A resident of Yucatan (population 2,400) Ms. Silva is 80 years-old, blind and severely diabetic. She is cared for by a younger sister and niece.

Sergei Schevchenko is a 33-year scientist from Ukraine with double doctorates from American universities in computer science and biomedical engineering. With 4 patents and over 50 professional papers in premier academic journals, he would like to emigrate to the U.S. and work with colleagues at Johns Hopkins or the University of Chicago. However, he has no relatives in the U.S.

Guess whose petition gets approved first from Homeland Security? Ms. Gonzalez's elderly aunt. Dr. Schevchenko is assigned a slot way down in the pecking order. He will wait years.

Such is the reality of the U.S. immigration system--one that is incoherent, dysfunctional, exasperating, and downright asinine.

For the last half-century, family ties have been the priority in admitting foreigners to the U.S. Two-thirds of those petitioners are classified under "family reunification," 18% "humanitarian" and "diversity", and only 15% of the total can be considered "economic immigration". While this system and criteria may seem compassionate and humane, it is inimical to the economic security of the United States.

For America to compete in the 21st century, we need a robust innovation economy; and that means a workforce skilled in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math). Yet, American students are under-enrolled in those areas, and the United States is projected to face a shortage of one million STEM workers by 2022.

The downward trend in STEM majors (as students opt for business, law, psychology, communications, and government); means that only foreigners can help fill the gap. Foreign students comprise one of every three individuals earning graduate degrees each year in STEM, with over 80% of the computer science and electrical engineering students coming from abroad. Sadly, due to our broken visa system, it is exceedingly difficult for them to remain in the country after graduation.

There is some recourse in the H-1B program that allows firms in the U.S. to temporarily hire foreign workers in occupations that require highly specialized knowledge and a bachelor's degree or higher in the specific specialty. The cap currently stands at 65,000--in effect by law since 1990--yet companies, universities, and research centers have complained for years that this number is woefully inadequate and that the cap should be lifted--even doubled. And while a number of economic nationalists cite some instances of abuse with the program, there are indeed protections for U.S. workers. Wages paid may not be lower for the same position, and a U.S. worker cannot be displaced by an H-1B visa holder.

As for economic impacts, giving priority to highly skilled workers is incontestable. Harvard University economist George Borjas calculates that this class of immigrant can contribute more to the economy, since they pay higher taxes and use fewer services. Employment effects? Rather than reduce the number of jobs available to American workers, foreign-born STEM graduates often create additional jobs for U.S.-born workers. Research shows that when a state gains 100 foreign-born STEM workers, an average of 262 jobs are created for U.S.-born workers. Edward Conrad of the American Enterprise Institute argues that doubling the numbers of the top 5% of America's talent pool could actually double the U.S. growth rate.

One should also note that skilled immigrants are more likely to obtain a patent and launch a start-up (over 40% in Silicon Valley). Firms such as Google, eBay, Yahoo, Space X, and Apple were founded by immigrants or a child of immigrants.

President Trump's proposal for a merit-based immigration system will reward points based on age, education, language, receipt of a job offer, special talents, investors, and spouses (with points under the same rubric). Australia, Canada, and New Zealand have merit-based systems in place already. Such systems provide advantages of impartiality, transparency, automation, and efficiency. In the words of economics professor and former Labor Secretary Ray Marshall, merit-based immigration will stimulate innovation, productivity and quality output.

Yes, America's got talent—but not enough of it. It needs to import it. A merit-based immigration system for a merit-based society will enhance our economic security and significantly boost our competitiveness. The president is right on the money with this part of his immigration.

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