



The Great Immigration Debate

[Patricia Smith explores the nation's divide over how to deal with illegal immigration. She outlines the role of immigration in our history, notes the "wariness" felt over immigration ever since, and questions when and how Congress might act on the issue.]

With 12 million illegal immigrants in the U.S., everyone agrees our immigration system is broken. What no one seems to agree on is how to fix it.

Erin Goheen and Andres Gamboa are both students at the University of Arizona, and they both grew up in the state. But when it comes to the topic of immigration, they don't have much in common.

Goheen, a 20-year-old senior from Phoenix, blames illegal immigrants for Arizona's crime problem, which has gotten so bad, she says, that she's afraid to be out on city streets after dark. That's why she supports Arizona's tough new immigration law, which gives local police broad power to arrest anyone they think may be in the country illegally, and makes it a crime for all noncitizens not to carry immigration papers.

"I am more than thrilled about this law," she says. "I've read it more than 20 times. I have it printed out and take it with me almost everywhere."

But to Gamboa, an 18-year-old freshman from Tucson whose parents are Mexican immigrants, the new law is simply a threat. Born in California, Gamboa is a U.S. citizen, and he says his parents are here legally. But that hasn't prevented scary run-ins with authorities, who he says recently tried to search his family's home in the middle of the night for no good reason. He fears the new law will only make things worse for Hispanics in Arizona.

"It's a law based on racism," he says. "I know a lot of people who are afraid of going out in the street. They just take their children to school and go right home. They feel like their safety is threatened."

Goheen and Gamboa represent the sharp divide not only between Arizonans, but also among Americans in general on the subject of immigration. Arizona's tough new immigration law has reignited the national debate and put a spotlight on Washington's failure to tackle this issue at the federal level, leaving a vacuum some states and cities are trying to fill.

An estimated 12 million illegal immigrants live in the United States, with about 7 million from Mexico. While there are illegal immigrants in every state, they are concentrated in California, Texas, Florida, New York, New Jersey, and Arizona.

Path to Legalization?

Nearly everyone agrees that America's immigration system is broken; what they don't agree on is how to fix it.

Broadly speaking, conservatives favor tightening border security, with some talking about deporting illegal immigrants. Liberals have generally been pushing for a path toward legalization for those here illegally, providing they pay fines, learn English, and wait their turn to be considered. This is the approach favored by President Barack Obama, who voiced strong opposition to Arizona's approach.

“If we continue to fail to act at a federal level, we will continue to see misguided efforts opening up around the country,” he said.

Congressional leaders have vowed to tackle immigration reform soon, and Democrats and Republicans already agree on the need for better border security.

‘Most Explosive Issue’

But politics comes into play as both parties try to take into account the views of important constituencies. Hispanic voters, for example, are a growing force in big states like California, Florida, Texas, and New York that neither party wants to alienate; they’d like to see illegal immigrants given a chance to become legal, as would employers who rely on immigrants to take jobs they say Americans no longer want.

But many voters see immigrants as threats to their jobs and wage levels—especially at a time when the unemployment rate is around 10 percent—as well as a drain on services like schools, police, and health care.

“Immigration is the most explosive issue I’ve seen in my political career,” says Mark McKinnon, who was a senior adviser to former President George W. Bush.

While the debate over immigration is especially heated right now, immigration has been a hot topic in the U.S. from the nation’s beginnings.

In 1776, most Americans were immigrants, or the descendants of immigrants, from the British Isles. The majority were white Anglo-Saxon Protestants who came in search of economic opportunity or to escape religious or political persecution. But the population also included large numbers of Dutch, Spanish, and Germans, in addition to American Indians and blacks, who were brought from Africa as slaves beginning in 1619.

Although most Americans can trace their ancestry back to immigrants at some point, they have often been wary about welcoming foreigners, both legal and illegal.

A History of Wariness

Even before America’s founding, Benjamin Franklin worried that German immigrants were taking over his state. “Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a colony of aliens, who shortly will be so numerous as to Germanize us instead of us Anglicizing them,” Franklin wrote in 1751.

The 19th century brought very different immigrants, starting with the Irish and later Italians, both largely poor farmers and Catholic. Then came the Chinese, who arrived in large numbers on the West Coast during the Gold Rush and later helped build the railroads, and Jews fleeing pogroms in Russia and Eastern Europe.

Before 1875, there were few restrictions on immigration to the U.S. America’s continued westward expansion, the Industrial Revolution, and the abolition of slavery created an unending demand for labor to work on the nation’s farms and in its factories and mines.

But the surge in Irish and Italian immigrants to a largely Protestant nation provoked a backlash. During the 1840s, the American Party, also known as the Know-Nothings, formed in opposition to immigration. Its members feared that immigrants would take away their jobs and that Catholics would take over the country.

Keeping Out the Chinese

In the West, there were protests against Chinese immigrants, and in 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, barring immigration from China for the next 10 years. (The ban was later extended and ultimately not repealed until 1943.)

Opposition to immigration intensified as the number of immigrants soared at the beginning of the 20th century. In 1907, the peak year for immigration in this period, almost 1.3 million new immigrants arrived.

“There was just this fear that millions of people were going to pour in,” says Mae Ngai, a historian at Columbia University in New York. “You could read the discussion from the 1910s and think you were looking at something from today—if you took out ‘Italians’ and put in ‘Mexicans.’”

In the 1920s, Congress imposed quotas that sharply reduced the number of immigrants allowed in, and gave preference to Northern Europeans in an attempt to re-create the ethnic profile of early 19th-century America. As intended, these quotas worked against Southern and Eastern Europeans, and during World War II prevented millions of Jews and other refugees from escaping the Nazis and the Holocaust.

In 1965, spurred in part by the civil rights movement, the U.S. eliminated immigration quotas altogether, leading to an influx of arrivals from Asia and Latin America who, once again, looked and spoke differently than the immigrants who preceded them.

Today, the U.S. is in the midst of its fourth great wave of immigration, following those in the 1850s, the 1880s, and the early 1900s. The current wave could turn out to be the biggest: The Pew Research Center projects that foreign-born Americans will exceed 15 percent of the population by 2025, breaking a century-old record of 14.8 percent in 1890.

‘Mixed’ Families

The debate over immigration today is largely about illegal immigration. But illegal immigration is often more complicated than it seems. For example, there are now thousands of “mixed” families in the U.S. in which the parents are in the U.S. illegally, but their children, born in the United States, are citizens.

There’s also the question of how to treat the estimated 1 million young people who were brought to the U.S. illegally as infants or children by their parents. Though they were raised in the U.S. and feel as American as anyone who was born here, they are technically here illegally and therefore can’t get Social Security numbers or federal financial aid for college, and they have trouble getting jobs.

Earlier this year, young immigrants in several cities held “coming out parties” where they publicly announced that they are illegal. In addition to raising awareness of their situation, the gatherings were designed to push for passage of legislation pending in Congress known as the Dream Act, which would provide a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants who came to the U.S. when they were under 16 and graduate from American high schools.

There are also thousands of people serving in the U.S. military who have spouses or close relatives who are illegal. Many say they’re afraid their families will be deported while they’re away fighting in Iraq or Afghanistan.

Will Congress Act ?

In 2007, Congress came close to passing comprehensive immigration reform. But despite the support of President Bush and a bipartisan coalition in Congress, the legislation failed—largely over a provision laying out a path to citizenship for those here illegally.

That's again part of the reforms supported by President Obama. Under the legislation currently being considered, illegal immigrants who want to remain in the U.S. would have to admit they broke the law, pay whatever back taxes they owe, and pass a criminal background check to qualify for legal residency.

The bill would also increase penalties for hiring illegal immigrants, strengthen border enforcement, and create a new temporary-worker program to allow migrants to work in the U.S. for limited periods of time.

If attempts to pass federal immigration reform fail, more states may follow Arizona's lead and take matters into their own hands. At least four states—South Carolina, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and Minnesota—are already considering laws similar to Arizona's.

At the same time, in some immigrant-friendly parts of the country, exactly the opposite is happening: A number of cities—including San Francisco, New Haven, Conn., and Trenton, N.J.—are issuing official identification cards to illegal residents to make their lives easier.

Whatever the outcome, the debate is likely to be heated, as it has been for the last 250 years. "There's an old immigrant saying that sums it up: America beckons, but Americans repel," says Alan Kraut, who teaches immigration history at American University in Washington. "This is nothing new."

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