

Why we need immigration

By: Adam Twardowski – April 18, 2013

Immigration reform has been in the news recently, principally in relation to an emerging consensus in Congress over a comprehensive overhaul that will touch everything from the contentious issue of border security to expanding the number of visas for highly skilled workers in technical fields. Now, although the point of this overhaul is to facilitate a bipartisan agreement that can pass both houses of Congress and clear the president's desk, there are few things about the modern Republican Party that frustrate me more than many of its members' intransigence on immigration reform in the recent debate over its design and execution.

Next to the convoluted tax code and the increasingly overregulated area of health care, there is probably no field that has been more contorted by decades of inert policy and misguided thinking than immigration, and I mostly blame the Republican Party for the snail's pace at which serious attempts at reform have taken place. Even though the U.S.'s economy is unparalleled dynamism remains one of the world's top destinations for aspiring immigrants, the loopholes through which those immigrants have to jump in order to establish themselves here are so vast and complex that they threaten to choke off the key competitive advantage of America's ever-growing and diverse pool of human talent. What this country needs more than ever is a revitalized immigration policy that recognizes the enormous economic boon of both skilled and unskilled immigration and that makes it easy for America's most critical and yet chronically understaffed industries to find the talent they need to grow and thrive.

The problems with America's immigration system extend far beyond illegal Mexican aliens, who in the years preceding the financial crisis and late-2000s recession received enormous attention from the media and elected officials.

A number of border state Congressmen continue to demand the construction of a highly fortified fence with Mexico and refuse to acquiesce to any policy proposal that remotely sounds like "amnesty." It's worth noting that although there are an estimated 11 million foreigners illegally residing in the U.S. at the moment, the tide of immigration from our southern neighbor has virtually halted in recent years. The Pew Hispanic Center reports that net immigration from Mexico has stopped and actually may have reversed, and this can be attributed to this country's relatively weak economy.

While in various quarters one often hears demands for all illegal immigrants' immediate deportation because of their callous violation of America's sacred laws, this suggestion has to be dismissed outright as a matter of policy. Regardless of anyone's fervent opposition to "rewarding" people who break American law with pathways to citizenship or other means of normalizing their immigration status, the reality and immensity of illegal residence in this country make expulsion an unworkable and totally undesirable "solution."

Finding a way to normalize illegal immigrants' status would bring their labor out of undocumented sectors of the economy, enable them to pay taxes normally even as they continue to make use of services ranging from welfare to education and very likely contribute to an upward trend in domestic wages and working conditions. I wholeheartedly support what some detractors would refer to as "amnesty."

But as I said, there are problems with America's immigration system that are, in my view, far more urgent than even the glaring issue of trying to deal with 11 million undocumented residents. Earlier this month, on Monday, April 3, the government began accepting applications for its annual distribution of H-1B visas, which are granted to highly skilled workers in chronically understaffed fields such as computer science and engineering.

According to immigration attorney Jared Leung, by the Friday of that week, the number of applications exceeded the program's statutorily imposed limit of 65,000. The government had to sift through the 124,000 applications through a randomized lottery process.

A diverse array of American companies, particularly in clusters of innovation such as Silicon Valley, have spent years and millions of dollars lobbying the federal government to expand the pool of highly skilled individuals who can qualify for this visa. As the Cato Institute points out, the fact that H-1B slots are being filled so quickly even as companies willingly fork over thousands of dollars in attorneys' fees in individual cases to hire workers demonstrates that America's highly skilled immigration system is in desperate need of expansion and reform.

It's virtually impossible to understate the crucial role immigrants have played in America's economic vitality.

As the Cato Institute points out, 40 percent of Fortune 500 companies were founded by immigrants or immigrants' children. The National Foundation for American Policy found that 48 percent of those companies had at least one immigrant founder; 75 percent of firms surveyed had one or more skilled immigrant as a key member of its product development or management teams. Companies from Google to Intel to eBay are all direct byproducts of immigration, and it is difficult to imagine how differently our lives would look without them.

The myopic focus on creating an impenetrable border with Mexico while simultaneously figuring out some ludicrous way to deport 11 million illegal residents distracts from the major problems the U.S. will begin to experience if it doesn't emerge as a more attractive place to immigrate.

Countries like Canada could provide a potential model, particularly as the Canadian model relates to filling short-staffed technical sectors. Regardless, it's crucial for politicians and policymakers of all stripes to agree on one indisputable point and that is that immigration enriches this country beyond measure, and the competitive health of the American economy will depend on its further facilitation.