

Another View: Fairness act a step toward a logical immigration policy

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Last November the U.S. House of Representatives came together in a rare bipartisan moment to overwhelmingly pass the Fairness for High-Skilled Immigrants Act. Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Ia., placed a hold on the bill in the Senate until July 11, which means that the Senate will soon debate this much-needed reform.

Fairness for High-Skilled Immigrants would streamline the issuance of green cards to skilled professionals and investors seeking U.S. residency. The current rule allows only 7 percent of employment-based green cards to be allotted to immigrants from any one country — creating an enormous backlog for skilled immigrants from India, China and the Philippines. The Fairness act would eliminate the per-country limit and decrease wait times.

Critics of legal immigration argue that allowing skilled immigrants to come to the United States deprives native-born Americans of job opportunities at a time when

unemployment is 8.2 percent. This argument rests on the fallacy that the job market is a fixed pie and that each immigrant hired by a U.S. business means one fewer job is available to a native-born citizen.

In reality, skilled immigrants complement and benefit American workers and make domestic companies more productive and competitive. Many of the most successful businesses in Iowa — including such large employers as the Principal Financial Group and DuPont Pioneer — rely on the skills of talented immigrants who work alongside native-born Iowans.

The Iowa senator's holdup of the Fairness act was even more perplexing in view of Iowa's recent history with immigrants. Successful Iowa firms created by immigrants have created numerous employment opportunities for Americans. In 1974, Naum Staroselsky, a Russian immigrant, founded Compressor Controls Corp. in Des Moines. It now has 300 employees in 12 countries. In 1990, Turkish immigrant Matthew Rizai founded Engineering Animation Inc. in Ames, which grew to employ nearly 500 Iowans before the business was acquired by Unigraphics Solutions Inc. in 1998.

And immigrant entrepreneurship isn't limited to Iowa. Silicon Valley is a bright spot in America's economy and home to hundreds of companies founded by immigrants. Skilled

immigrants who have a college degree represent less than 3 percent of the U.S. population. A Kauffman Foundation report says this group has founded 20 percent of all bioscience firms, 28 percent of all software companies and a whopping 35 percent of all semiconductor firms in recent years.

Over 60 percent of Ph.D. computer science graduates from American universities are foreign-born. But many talented individuals who could fill jobs at companies such as Microsoft, IBM and Cognizant are forced to return home because of green card restrictions, while numerous high-skilled jobs go unfilled.

America turns away huge numbers of skilled immigrants each year because of our obsolete immigration policies. Today, decade-long waiting lines keep would-be Americans apart from their families, depriving our nation of promising new businesses and skilled workers. The fundamental problem today is a lack of green cards, especially employment-based ones. The Fairness act would improve allocation of these scarce documents.

Innovation thrives when bright minds coalesce. Freeing up domestic businesses to hire skilled employees, no matter where they come from, would give a shot in the arm to U.S.

economic growth. The Fairness for High-Skilled Immigrants Act would bring us one step closer to that goal.

The Fairness act also brings relief to family-based immigration. Just like employment-based green cards, only 7 percent of annually issued family-based green cards (excluding immediate relatives) can be issued to people from the same country. The Fairness act would allow no more than 15 percent of the total number to come from any one country, which would be a significant improvement.

Reforms like Fairness are big steps in the right direction. Our immigration system is a mess of complex regulations that keep productive people away from our shores and provide an incentive for unauthorized immigration. Removing or increasing per-country limits are great first steps toward a more rational immigration policy.