

U.S. Immigration Policy: What Should We Do?

Since the first European settlers set foot in North America, immigration has suffused the American experience. Indeed, many of the values that unite Americans as a nation are tied to immigration. Immigration has not only framed our vision of the U.S. role in the world, but has seeped into our view of human nature. Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example, saw in immigration a phenomenon that “will construct a new race, a new religion, a new state, a new literature” in the United States.

The idealism surrounding immigration explains in large part the deep feelings it evokes in the public policy arena. These sentiments have jostled with concerns about the economy, ethnic relations, social services, the environment, and other issues. In recent years, the debate over immigration has expanded to incorporate a broad range of foreign policy issues. The discussion now features arguments on U.S. relations with Latin America, human rights, international trade, the worldwide refugee crisis, and our national security.

As Congressional representatives debate proposals for reform of current immigration law, it is important for Americans to understand these issues within the wider context of our long-term goals for immigration policy. Current proposals focus primarily on ways to resolve issues related to border control, undocumented workers, and law enforcement. The proposed legislative policies raise additional questions about human rights, the economy, the environment, security, and other issues.

What follows are four policy “Options” that frame this question. They are designed to help you think about a range of possible policy directions and the ramifications of each. The four options are put in stark terms to highlight very different approaches. Each option includes some policies, lessons from history, and underlying beliefs. Each also includes a set of criticisms designed to help you think carefully about the trade-offs involved. It is important to understand that the options here do not reflect the views of any one political party or organization. It is your job to sort through the four options presented, deliberate with your peers on the strengths and challenges of each, think about your own concerns and values, and then frame an “Option 5 “ that reflects your views.

As you develop your own option for current U.S. immigration policy, think about these questions:

- What is the history of U.S. immigration?
- Who is coming to the United States?
- Why are they coming and what do they bring with them?
- How does immigration impact the country?
- What effect does our immigration policy have on our relations with other countries?
- What U.S. interests are at stake in this issue?
- What should our long-term goals be concerning immigration?
- What steps should the United States take in the near term?
- What values are important to you?
- What are the strengths of your option? What are the arguments against it?

Finally, you are encouraged to participate in an online ballot focused on the question of the role of the United States in the world. Ballots are available at www.choices.edu/resources/ballot.php.

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This lesson is excerpted from *U.S. Immigration Policy in an Unsettled World*. This one-week curriculum unit gives students the tools they need to wrestle with the questions involved in U.S. immigration policy.

Option 1: Open Ourselves to the World

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the forces of globalization are rapidly creating a new world. International trade is steadily expanding, while national borders are losing their significance. People, ideas, and goods traverse the globe at an ever-accelerating pace. In the world of the future, the United States will stand out as a shining example. While rigid nationalism continues to hold back many countries, Americans can take pride in a heritage that promotes openness, tolerance, and diversity. Compared to our chief economic rivals in Japan and Western Europe, the United States is poised to compete in the international marketplace. American movies, music, fashion, and brand names are attractive to people throughout the world because they symbolize a culture that embraces and celebrates many cultures. Immigration puts our country in touch with the tastes and preferences of consumers worldwide, and gives U.S. companies an edge in opening export markets.

From its earliest days, the United States has been a land of opportunity for people outside our borders. Each wave of immigrants has contributed to the United States' greatness and enriched our society. Today, immigrants are still coming. This latest generation of immigrants contains the best and brightest from a rich variety of cultures and regions. Even those lacking a formal education are driven by a strong sense of initiative and an unshakable work ethic. They have come because they believe the United States is the land of opportunity. They recognize that the United States rewards hard work and ability like no other country in the world. In the end, the talents, ambitions, and dreams they bring will benefit all Americans. Keeping our doors open lets the world know that the United States remains a country that looks forward to tomorrow.

What policies should we pursue?

- Remove bureaucratic obstacles in the immigration process that keep family members apart.
- Allow people worldwide with a legitimate fear of persecution the full protection of U.S. refugee and asylum laws.
- Adjust immigration laws to permit greater immigration from countries such as China and Mexico that have been the victims of unfair restrictions in the past.
- Provide immigrants with more opportunities, job training, and English-language instruction to speed their adjustment to American life.
- Ensure that everyone in the United States, including illegal immigrants, has access to education, basic health care, and other essential services.

Option 1 is based on the following beliefs

- America is still a young, vigorous country with room to grow.
- America's strength lies in its diversity, particularly in the fresh ideas and cultures provided by new immigrants.
- Immigration does not unduly threaten our national security.

Arguments for

- Welcoming new immigrants into our country will inject valuable skills into the U.S. economy and enable American culture to maintain the rich diversity that appeals to consumers the world over.
- Renewing the United States' long tradition of offering opportunity and refuge for immigrants will earn the United States respect and admiration from people throughout the world.
- Immigrants will take advantage of their ties to their native countries to open up new export markets for American products.

Arguments against

- If immigration continues at its current pace, more than fifty million newcomers will flood into the United States in the next half century, overloading our schools, hospitals, and other social services.
- An open immigration policy will inevitably make it easier for would-be terrorists to enter the country undetected.
- High levels of immigration will deprive American workers of jobs while forcing government to spend more on the needs of immigrants.
- Encouraging highly skilled workers to immigrate to the United States robs poor countries of their most valuable human resources.
- pening our doors to unskilled immigrants at a time when the U.S. economy offers them few opportunities will only add to our society's problems.
- High levels of immigration will push our country's population past tolerable limits and inflict still more harm on our country's environment.
- The continual arrival of large numbers of immigrants, both legal and illegal, will eventually overwhelm American culture and contribute to the fragmentation of our society.

Option 2: Make Emigration Unnecessary

As the new century unfolds, the world is on the move. The population explosion in poor countries, the spread of war and terror, and the age-old curses of hunger and disease are driving increasing numbers to our shores. Emigration from the developing world is at an all time high, and the United States is the destination for the largest percentage of these emigrants. Opening our doors to large-scale immigration resolves no one's problems. Admitting huge numbers of newcomers into the United States every year not only overburdens our schools and health care system, it drains poor countries of many of their most educated, highly skilled workers. This "brain drain" only adds to the challenge in poor countries of meeting the needs of their own populations.

We are a strong country, but we cannot continue to absorb new immigrants into this country at this breakneck pace and without compromising our own economy and social structure. Nonetheless, both for practical and for humanitarian reasons we cannot fence ourselves off from poverty and suffering outside of our borders. As the strongest economic power on earth and the most sought destination of the world's poor, the burden of international leadership on this issue rests with the United States. We should join with the international community to provide the development assistance necessary to stabilize the migration of the world's poor. We should also explore ways to create incentives for the best and brightest in the developing world to stay where they are and contribute their skills to improve conditions in their own countries. By improving life among the world's poor and disadvantaged, we can get a grip on the forces that drive desperate immigrants to our country's shores. Ultimately, we will all be better off.

What policies should we pursue?

- Expand foreign aid and trade benefits to help governments in the developing world to strengthen their economies and reduce the flow of immigration to the United States.
- Join other developed countries to coordinate the resettlement of existing refugees and prevent future refugee crises.
- Apply consistent, humane standards in granting political asylum to refugees, rather than mold refugee policy to suit political purposes.
- Reduce the number of immigration visas awarded annually to 600,000, including refugees.

Option 2 is based on the following beliefs

In today's interconnected world, we must accept that the problems affecting other countries are America's problems as well.

- By developing well-crafted programs of foreign aid and trade benefits, the United States can help people in poor countries improve their lives.
- While we have an obligation to reduce suffering wherever possible, we have a primary responsibility to the well-being of those here at home.

Arguments for

- Expanding foreign aid programs and trade benefits for the developing world will reduce the drain of highly skilled workers from poor countries and also reduce the anger that fuels terrorism.
- Developing refugee policies that are consistent and humane will bolster the U.S. image throughout the world.
- Reducing the level of immigration to the United States will reduce the drain on our social service resources and allow us to better monitor those who come.

Arguments against

- Dumping money into new foreign aid programs will come at the expense of addressing other, more pressing needs.
- Closing our doors to immigrants will increase resentment of the United States.
- Awarding immigration visas on the basis of humanitarian concerns, rather than economic priorities, will not significantly lower U.S. spending on social services for newcomers.
- As past failures show, U.S. assistance can not overcome the crippling poverty and social chaos plaguing much of the developing world.
- Without high levels of immigration, the United States will lack the talent and energy to strengthen our country and address future problems.
- No matter what we do, people will always want to come to the United States.

Option 3: Admit the Talent We Need

Economic competition among nations in the twenty-first century is set to reach new levels of intensity. In today's world, the United States must be prepared to compete in an increasingly demanding global marketplace and adapt to the relentless pace of technological change. In the last few years, our country's economy has been going through a wrenching readjustment. Businesses are cutting jobs. Government programs are being trimmed. Workers are being forced to do more with less. While our economy has emerged from the trials of downsizing leaner and stronger, the economic recession that has hit in the first years of the new century is taking a toll. We must make sure that our country's immigration policy is in line with our economic priorities. After calling on working Americans to tighten their belts, we owe them nothing less.

Every country has the right to promote its national interests. The United States should be no different. We cannot afford to admit into our country every year hundreds of thousands of newcomers who will be a burden on our society. Immigration policy should be designed first to serve our country's economic needs, not to solve the world's problems. A two-pronged approach makes the most sense. To spur American high-tech industries forward, our doors should be open to scientists and engineers from abroad. To help American factories, farms, and service industries hold down costs, we should allow a limited number of foreigners to work temporarily in low-wage jobs. By forging ahead with a realistic, far-sighted strategy, we can make immigration policy work for the United States.

What policies should we pursue?

- Award two hundred thousand immigration visas annually for skilled workers and their families, making the advancement of science and technology the top priority in guiding immigration policy.
- Reduce total annual immigration to five hundred thousand, including refugees, making adjustments to reflect economic conditions. (During an economic downturn, the number of immigration visas should be decreased, while during an economic expansion the number should be increased.)
- Allow a limited number of foreigners to work temporarily in the United States in agriculture and other industries facing labor shortages.
- Offer scholarships to foreign graduate students in science, engineering, and other high-tech fields, provided they will work in the United States for at least five years.
- Deny education, health care, and other social services to illegal aliens, except in cases of emergency.

Option 3 is based on the following beliefs

- Maintaining our economy's competitive edge is essential to the well-being of Americans.
- Promoting America's economic strength should be the guiding principle underlying our country's immigration policy.
- Skilled, well-educated immigrants are most capable of contributing to the betterment of the United States.

Arguments for

- Admitting highly skilled immigrants who are well-suited to the demands of the U.S. economy will help hold down government costs for welfare, health care, and other social services.
- Tailoring U.S. immigration policy to the needs of our economy will attract immigrants who have the most to offer to American industry, especially in high-tech fields.
- Permitting the entry of temporary foreign workers into the labor force will help low-wage industries remain in the United States while competing in the global market.

Arguments against

- Limiting immigration to the well-educated discriminates against worthy applicants who have been deprived of an opportunity to educate themselves.
- Pursuing an immigration policy that overlooks the concerns of other countries will damage U.S. foreign relations, especially with our neighbors to the south.
- Drawing the best and brightest skilled workers from poor countries will undercut economic development in much of the world and harm international stability.
- Admitting foreigners as temporary workers and denying social services to illegal aliens will create a group of second-class citizens with few rights and little stake in American society.
- Reducing the number of immigration visas available for family reunification will leave many close relatives apart.
- Assisting foreign graduate students in science and engineering will deprive Americans of jobs and educational opportunities, and leave many of our most important high-tech industries dominated by foreign-born workers.

Option 4: Restrict Immigration

The world is changing at a breakneck pace. The population explosion, war, terror, hunger, and disease plague an ever-growing portion of humanity. The United States is a strong country, but it cannot solve the world's problems. As the planet's population soars from six billion today to an estimated ten billion by the year 2050, we must recognize that Americans can do little to end the misery that haunts much of the world. On the contrary, the forces of economic change have left millions of Americans struggling to keep up. Many of us are working longer hours than ever just to make ends meet. Schools are overcrowded and underfunded, while health care costs have skyrocketed. Simply maintaining our way of life amounts to a major challenge.

The arguments supporting massive immigration in the United States have long since passed into history. At a time when our country is trimming back social services for our own citizens, we can hardly afford to keep the door open every year to roughly one million newcomers from poor nations. The world's disadvantaged people cannot be blamed for wanting to enter the United States. Many of them lead lives of desperation and hopelessness. But the United States has already given enough. For decades, we have accepted more immigrants than all the other countries of the world combined. Now it is time to say stop. We have the right to preserve the uniquely American culture that has been created over the past two centuries. We have a duty to stop the senseless influx of unskilled immigrants that holds down wages for struggling American workers. We should drastically reduce the number of immigrants we accept and commit the resources necessary to take control of our borders. The threat of runaway change must be brought under control.

What policies should we pursue?

- Reduce the number of immigration visas awarded annually to the level set in 1965—two hundred ninety thousand—including refugees.
- Strengthen border control by tripling the number of Border Patrol agents, constructing impassable barriers at major crossing points along the U.S.-Mexican border, and swiftly deporting foreigners who overstay their visas.
- Introduce a national identity card that all workers would be required to present when applying for employment and social services.
- Pressure the governments of the Caribbean to take steps to prevent mass movements of refugees to the United States.
- Insist that those seeking political asylum apply at U.S. embassies in foreign countries.
- End the policy of granting automatic citizenship to the children of foreigners born in the United States.

Option 4 is based on the following beliefs

- The United States is one of the few islands of stability and prosperity in a world marked largely by poverty and desperation.
- Continued high levels of immigration would overwhelm America's unique culture.
- High levels of immigration deprive America's poor of opportunities for economic advancement.

Arguments for

- Reducing immigration will allow the United States to hold down spending for education, health care, and other social services.
- Restoring firm control over our borders will help us reduce the flow of drugs into the United States and strengthen our defenses against international terrorism.
- Lowering the number of newcomers entering the U.S. labor market will make more jobs available for American workers, especially those with few skills.

Arguments against

- Fencing off our neighbors to the south and restricting immigration from abroad will fuel anti-American sentiment throughout the world, and harm relations with many of our leading trading partners.
- Closing the door on new immigrants will deprive the American work force of skills, talent, and ambition.
- Introducing a national identity card will make foreign-born Americans a target for suspicion and discrimination.
- Drastically reducing immigration will create a society that lacks a solid understanding of the world beyond our borders.
- Without young immigrants entering the country, American workers will face a heavy burden in supporting the steadily increasing elderly population.
- Severely cutting back immigration will leave many recently arrived Americans separated from close family members in their native lands.