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OpinionExtra

Expand paths for legal immigration

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IT'S TIME for both Democrats and Republicans to recognize the many compelling reasons for overhauling our current immigration system.

Start with the economic arguments, which are overwhelming. Our high-tech visa backlog is driving Microsoft and Facebook jobs to Dublin and Vancouver. Our rules on foreign graduates in countless fields, including engineering, mathematics, and computer science, are sending young people home who would rather stay and work here. Instead of benefiting from our beacon of freedom, we are literally educating our competition, at the expense of US innovation and exports.

We have been just as shortsighted when it comes to attracting foreign entrepreneurs: Our system lacks a start-up visa for those seeking to found companies here.

Meanwhile, our annual caps on the number of all kinds of visas, from H-1B (specialty occupation) visas to permanent resident visas, are unrealistic. Many people become frustrated by the multiyear delays and give up their dream of trying to make a contribution here.

Over half of our agricultural workers are undocumented. In a country that prides itself on the rule of law, that's a joke. We need a robust temporary guest worker program for farm workers. Canada's program is a good model: Their guest workers can go back to their home countries and then return yearly to Canada, as long as there is a certified labor shortage.

Similarly, we need a year-round visa

category for unskilled workers in fields such as health care, food service, construction, and property maintenance, and it should provide a mechanism to move from temporary to permanent status.

The wages of all these workers would be fully taxed, for the first time. Once out of the shadows, workers in legal or probationary status will be able to move from job to job, increasing their earnings. And yes, they should be free to join unions if they choose. Labor unions should no more oppose immigration reform than they should oppose an increase in the country's population.

Beyond the economic benefits of reform, there's another compelling reason for an immigration overhaul. Our current patchwork immigration system has all the disadvantages of "de facto legalization" for illegal immigrants, but none of the advantages.

Those 11 million undocumented workers manage to escape detection, so that's legalization of a sort. It sure beats being deported. But they don't get the benefit of legalizing their status, which would mean squaring their accounts with the government and being able to emerge from the shadows and strive openly to succeed here. Those 11 million people don't all need to become US citizens. They just need to start feeling that they can advance themselves without worrying that someone might notice and report them.

A principal argument against a probationary legal status (a status that has not yet ripened into a permanent right to stay) for millions of currently undocumented workers is that it creates "second-class citizens." But any type of status is better

than the shadowy nonstatus they have now. Some of them — those who pay their dues and "go to the back of the line" — will become citizens. While waiting their turn, they will see their US-born children enjoy the benefits of citizenship. They themselves will learn English, removing a hurdle to integration and increasing their earning power. They will be able to travel freely. And they will never again live in fear of a government knock on the door. With all that to gain, it's unlikely they would conclude that their present situation is preferable to probationary legal status.

There's a third compelling reason to support reform: It would be political suicide not to. President Obama won 71 percent of the Latino vote in the last election. Why? Because immigration reform matters to the current Latino electorate.

Conservatives who currently oppose such an overhaul should consider this: Hispanics are hard-working, patriotic, strongly committed to family, and by and large socially conservative. Fix this problem and they might well become Republican voters.

Republican congressmen, meanwhile, are committed to progrowth economic policies, hard work, self-reliance, entrepreneurship, innovation, and American exceptionalism. They are — or should be — natural supporters of a comprehensive overhaul of the US immigration system.

Given all those arguments, both sides of the aisle should be pushing for immigration reform.

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