Immigration in America: How Do We Fix a System in Crisis?

THE UNITED STATES has long been defined as a land of opportunity, a refuge from persecution, and a nation of immigrants. Throughout its history, the United States has welcomed millions of immigrants from every part of the world. While this influx has stimulated our economy and strengthened our culture in the past, some wonder whether it’s still good for the nation.

As we work our way out of a tough economic recession, many worry that newcomers are compromising our quality of life, exacerbating competition for scarce jobs, and threatening our security and sovereignty as a nation.

Most Americans agree that our immigration system needs an overhaul. Too many immigrants slip across our borders undetected and too many are here on expired temporary visas. Backlogs and bureaucracy prevent high-skilled foreign workers from getting the permits they need and hinder family members from being reunited with their loved ones in the United States.

Tackling the immigration issue requires that we take a fresh look at it and get beyond the polarized debates that too often divide the country rather than bring it together. Our challenge today is to build a system that reflects our essential values as a nation of laws and a nation of immigrants. This issue guide explores three different options for doing that.

**OPTION ONE**
**Welcome New Arrivals**
America is a nation of immigrants, a people weeded from many nations and races, bound together by a common vision of opportunity and freedom. That diversity has always been the backbone of America’s strength. A 21st-century immigration system must reflect these characteristic values along with a humanitarian commitment to refugees and those seeking freedom from persecution.

**EXAMPLES OF WHAT MIGHT BE DONE**
- Clear the backlog of immigrants currently waiting to get into the country and streamline the process by which qualified applicants are granted visas.
- Create a path to citizenship for the estimated 11 million unauthorized immigrants who reside in the United States by requiring that they pay back taxes, learn English, and get in line behind those already waiting to become naturalized citizens.
- Strengthen America’s commitment to refugees and other vulnerable people around the world through increased assistance, protection, and health services.
- Provide temporary legal residency (and the ability to apply for permanent residency) for unauthorized immigrants who were brought to the United States as minors.
- Strengthen the naturalization process by revising the citizenship test, training immigration judges, and developing web-based learning tools to boost the English language skills of those seeking citizenship.

**SOME CONSEQUENCES AND TRADE-OFFS TO CONSIDER**
- Making it easier for those waiting in line means accepting more immigrants at a time when jobs are tight, public resources are strained, and when we have trouble absorbing and integrating the high number of immigrants already here.
- Assisting undocumented immigrants to come out of the shadows may have the effect of rewarding people who entered the United States illegally while penalizing those who have pursued a legal route to citizenship. It may also encourage more unauthorized immigration.
- Focusing more of our attention and resources on refugees could divert them away from the millions of people within our borders who are in need.
- Such a policy might allow immigrants to use their newly acquired status to seek green cards for the parents who brought them into the country illegally. It would also reward those who broke the law by taking advantage of our taxpayer-financed public education system.
- Improvements in the naturalization system would drive up the already high costs of immigration and divert money away from more urgent priorities like education and health care.

**OPTION TWO**
**Protect Our Borders**
Some of America’s most serious social and economic problems are exacerbated by the influx of unauthorized immigrants. By falling to control illegal immigration, we’ve undermined our national security, stifled competition for scarce jobs, and strained the public purse. This option argues for tighter control of our borders, tougher enforcement of our immigration laws, and stiffer limits on the number of immigrants legally accepted into the country.

**EXAMPLES OF WHAT MIGHT BE DONE**
- Restrict the number of immigrants legally admitted into the United States by imposing tougher eligibility requirements, for instance by restricting immigration of family members other than spouses and minor children of U.S. citizens.
- Step up security along our borders by expanding the Mexican border fence and hiring more patrol agents and customs officials.
- Give states greater latitude to crack down on illegal immigration through measures like Arizona’s tough new immigration law.
- Invest in education, communications, and infrastructure in Mexico to improve its economy and stem the tide of immigrants coming here in search of a better life.
- Rein in benefits, including health care and public assistance, to un documented immigrants and their children.

**SOME CONSEQUENCES AND TRADE-OFFS TO CONSIDER**
- Stricter limits on immigration would close the door to many of the workers that America’s economy needs to remain competitive.
- Tougher enforcement along the border is likely to drive more activity underground, increase violence, and penalize employers.
- Anti-immigration laws may promote racial profiling and hamper law enforcement by discouraging witnesses from reporting crimes.
- This would compromise our humanitarian values by denying medical care and other help to people in need or at risk.

**OPTION THREE**
**Promote Economic Prosperity**
Protecting American jobs, while at the same time increasing economic competitiveness, requires a multifaceted immigration strategy, one that acknowledges the important contributions made by high- and low-skilled immigrants alike, but does not depress the wages of disadvantaged American workers or drain our public resources, especially during economic hard times.

**EXAMPLES OF WHAT MIGHT BE DONE**
- Make annual adjustments to the number of immigrant workers allowed into the United States depending on the overall strength of the economy.
- Issue green cards to foreign students who graduate from American colleges and universities, particularly in fields like science and technology—to encourage them to stay in the United States and contribute to the economy.
- Create a seasonal or temporary visa program for agricultural workers to provide an accessible labor pool for farmers and other growers.
- Grant temporary “start-up” visas to foreign entrepreneurs willing to invest capital and start new ventures in the United States and reward them with green cards if their companies do well.
- Shorten the wait time for employer-sponsored green cards to attract more high-skilled professionals from abroad.

**SOME CONSEQUENCES AND TRADE-OFFS TO CONSIDER**
- Many immigrants choose to come to the United States for reasons other than economic or professional opportunity. They may not be willing to work here if their visas were provisional.
- This would stiffen competition for hard-to-find jobs and put American workers at a disadvantage.
- Increased dependence on foreign workers can depress wages, lower productivity, and compromise workers’ rights in the farming industry.
- This would allow people to buy their way into the country, in effect selling the privilege of living and working in America to the highest bidder.
- Carrying out criminal and other background checks takes time and expediting the visa process could pose risks to our national security.