

A conversation with Neil G. Ruiz on immigration policy on June 28, 2013

Participants

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Note: This is a set of summary notes compiled by GiveWell in order to give an overview of the major points made by Neil Ruiz during his conversation with GiveWell.

Summary

GiveWell spoke with Neil Ruiz of the Brookings Institution about immigration policy in the U.S. and other countries. The main subjects were the immigration reform bill currently being considered by the U.S. Congress and other philanthropic opportunities related to international migration.

U .S. immigration reform bill

Political context for immigration reform

The U.S. Congress is currently considering a comprehensive immigration reform bill. Immigration reform is high on the political agenda because the current system is widely believed to be broken and Hispanic support was key to President Obama's reelection. The bill contains provisions to allow for both more high-skilled workers to enter the country and for many low-skilled migrants to gain legal status. Increasing the number of high-skilled migrants has widespread support. There is less support for a path to citizenship for low-skilled workers, which is why this piece of reform has been combined with more popular measures in a comprehensive bill.

Opposition to immigration reform can be found on both the far right and far left of the political spectrum. The Republican Party leadership is in favor of the bill as currently designed, because they believe they need to expand their support beyond white people. They face opposition from within their party, particularly from Tea Party Republican members of the House.

Important actors in shaping reform

The following groups have played a major role in the immigration reform process:

- The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), which has represented labor organizations.
- The U.S. Chamber of Commerce, which has represented business interests.
- inSPIRE STEM USA coalition, which advocates for high-skill immigration and represents employers and learned societies concerned about science and technology.
- Engine Advocacy, which represents the tech/startup community.
- The Economic Policy Institute (EPI), which is a liberal think tank that favors greater restrictions on immigration. They argued that there is no shortage of high-skilled workers and succeeded in advocating for restrictions on H1B visas in the original Senate bill. These restrictions were later removed from the bill, after a wave of rebuttals to EPI's initial paper.
- The Information Technology & Innovation Foundation, which published a study that rebutted the EPI's findings on the demand for high-skilled migrants.
- The Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank.
- The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank.
- The Center for Immigration Studies, a restrictionist think tank/advocacy group.
- The National Council of La Raza, the leading national Hispanic advocacy group.

Potential impact of immigration reform

The immigration reform bill, if passed, would create a merit-based immigration system. Migrants will be allowed entry based on a point system of their likely contribution to the national economy. Entrepreneurs with the capital to create new businesses will be allowed to start their businesses in the U.S. College graduates will be given the opportunity to stay and work in the U.S.

Reform will increase the U.S.'s competitiveness. Without reform, there is a possibility that within a decade there will be fewer people wanting to move to the U.S. because opportunities will be greater in other countries.

The Congressional Budget Office published a study that concluded that reform would likely address the problem of illegal immigration in the medium term by changing the incentives potential immigrants face and by tightening border security.

If the bill passes, there could be a continued political fight regarding the interpretation of the bill's language, especially regarding key issues such as increased border security, language requirements for immigrants, and the details of entrance exams and burdens placed on employers, such as mandating the use of the E-verify identification database. President Obama's appointment of the commissioner for the reform is likely to be very important, although Mr. Ruiz guessed the appointee would likely be an apolitical, data-driven technocrat.

What will happen if the bill does not pass

If the immigration reform bill does not pass, it is likely that there will be an extended period before comprehensive immigration reform is attempted again. The status quo may remain in effect for some time. The last time immigration reform was attempted at a national scale before this year was in 2007.

It may be possible to pass parts of the bill individually. Three primary points of agreement that might pass individually are:

1. Increased border security
2. Access to education, jobs and other benefits for immigrants who were brought to the country as children, similar to the DREAM Act.
3. More visas for high-skilled immigrants.

In the piecemeal approach, there would likely not be a path to legalization for undocumented workers or a merit-based visa allocation system. President Obama may not be willing to sign such piecemeal reform bills.

Labor mobility — beyond the immigration bill

Increasing the flow of immigrants could be positive for both sending and receiving countries. Immigrants fill needs in receiving countries, send remittances to their home countries, facilitate trade, and build intercontinental production networks through informal networking. This is a relatively neglected cause. The World Bank's Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development (KNOMAD) works on this issue. Michael Clemens of the Center for Global Development has done research on the benefits of increased immigration.

American voters tend to be isolationist. They don't favor policies that substantially increase the influx of migrants because they worry about their own jobs and don't believe that increased immigration could be beneficial to them. Companies don't want to be seen as supporting more migration because they may be branded as outsourcers.

Ideas for improving the international migration system

- Create “diaspora bonds.” Dilip Ratha has proposed this idea. These bonds would be sold by developing country governments and marketed to the country's diaspora. The proceeds would be used to fund infrastructure projects in the country.
- Allow migrants to the U.S. to collect social security in their home countries. These migrants pay into the social security system while they work in the U.S.

- Allowing them to collect these funds once they return to their home countries is both fair and provides an incentive to return home.
- Expand the Filipino model to other countries. The Philippines has had a policy of actively encouraging its citizens, particularly skilled workers such as nurses, to migrate for many years. It has a number of programs to assist and protect migrant workers, including a national insurance pool that will pay for injured workers to return home and embassies equipped to defend migrants' interests. Many governments have not adopted similar programs because they are reluctant to look like they want citizens to emigrate. A philanthropist could help replicate the Filipino programs for other immigrant populations as a way to promote migration.

Other people and groups for GiveWell to talk to

- Dilip Ratha, the World Bank, an expert in remittances and diasporas.
- AnnaLee Saxenian, U.C. Berkeley, and her co-author Vivek Wadhwa. They did research on high-skilled immigration for the Kauffman Foundation.
- Manuel Orozco, Inter-American Dialogue, specialist in leveraging remittances at the local level.
- Migrant groups including professional associations, for high-skilled immigrants, and hometown associations, for low-skilled immigrants.

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