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The White House Blog

What You Told Us About Immigration Reform

Posted by Cecilia Muñoz on May 23, 2011 at 12:00 PM EDT

Following the [President Obama's speech](#) on immigration reform in El Paso, Texas, I asked for your feedback on this issue through our [Advise the Advisor](#) program. We received thousands of responses from across the country to the following questions:

- **Immigration and American Competitiveness:** How can immigration reform support America's competitiveness in a 21st century economy?
- **Biggest Challenges to Reform:** What do you think are the biggest challenges to reforming America's immigration system?
- **Encouraging Bipartisan Debate:** What are some ways you can get a discussion going in your communities to encourage a bipartisan debate and move this issue forward?

A team at the White House reviewed all of your comments and ideas and below we've summarized and responded to some of what we heard from you.

Enforcement of Current Laws

We heard from many people who disagreed with the premise that we needed immigration reform or changes to our immigration laws. They argued that we need better enforcement of our current laws and more accountability for undocumented immigrants and the employers that hire them.

For example, Robert from Torrance, California said:

First we need to honor the immigration laws that already exists. The problem stems from a lack of enforcement, not a lack of new regulations. Simply, immigrants have always been welcome and have always contributed.

It's absolutely worth focusing on the best ways to enforce the laws that we have; that's why the President traveled to El Paso, Texas, which is on the border with Mexico. This Administration takes its enforcement role very seriously, and is working to do the smartest and most strategic job that we can at the border and in the interior, and we are measuring our impact and making adjustments as the data comes in to make sure we are getting it right. On the Department of Homeland Security website you'll find [information to show how we're doing on the border](#) and information on our [interior enforcement strategy](#). But in the end, we will not be able to fix what's broken about our immigration system by enforcement alone. There are more than ten million unauthorized immigrants living and working in the United States, and a strategy aimed at removing them all cannot be successful. Nor will enforcement fix the deficiencies in our legal immigration system, which separates families, undercuts us economically, and contributes to illegal immigration. To fix those problems, we need to reform the law.

Competing in the 21st Century Economy

Many respondents agreed that we need to reform our immigration system to make it easier for highly skilled workers to join the workforce in the United States. Duraikumar from Morrisville, North Carolina said:

To compete in the 21st century, the century of knowledge, America needs more skilled people. The available skilled force is not enough to remain competitive....Everybody knows that the current immigration system is broken. We need to reform the immigration system to bring more skilled immigrants to support America's competitiveness in a 21st century economy.

Our immigration system was last reformed in the mid- 1990s, when cellphones and the internet were emerging technologies. Those reforms were based on the premise that allowing even a limited number of immigrants to the country might mean fewer jobs for Americans. As the President and his team work with CEOs and other business leaders around the country on a range of economic issues, the immigration issue comes up over and over again because it is essential to our ability to create jobs in the sectors of the economy that are ripe for economic growth. CEO after CEO tells us about foreign-born employees on their teams without whom we would lose hundreds of jobs, and about people they would like to hire – who have been trained at our finest universities, but who cannot get permission to stay and work in the U.S., so they instead become our competition. If they are lucky and get a visa, our laws are often too restrictive to allow their spouses to live and work here, so other countries can lure them away. As the President said in El Paso, we don't want the next Google or Facebook to be started in India or China, we want it started here in the United States. And we need laws that make this possible.

Undocumented Immigrants

We also heard from many of you about how we should deal with the ten million undocumented immigrants in the United States. Some respondents were concerned that allowing undocumented immigrants to stay in the country rewards illegal activity while others recognized the contributions that undocumented workers make to our economy. Jeff from Colorado told us:

While I am in favor of giving all current illegals citizenship for the benefit of actually collecting taxes, it would look like we are rewarding illegal behavior. We need their tax dollars and manpower to stay competitive.

This is a fair point; and it's reasonable to say that we shouldn't reward people who are here in violation of the law. But it's also true that we are unlikely to succeed in removing all ten million of them, and it's not in our interest for them to remain in the U.S. working in the underground economy, where they can undercut U.S. workers because they fear standing up to employers who offer substandard wages and working conditions. President Obama believes that the right way to address this problem is to require accountability all across the board. Those of us in the federal government are accountable for enforcing the law wisely and well. [Businesses should be accountable](#) for the people that they hire, and those here illegally should be held accountable for getting on the right side of the law, paying a fine, learning English, paying taxes, and getting in line behind those who are waiting to become immigrants and citizens.

DREAM ACT

The DREAM Act was also a popular topic in your responses, with many respondents expressing support for this legislation. Sandra from Wisconsin said:

Undocumented immigrants are already contributing to our economy. Immigration reform allows them to live openly as legal residents and make a greater investment as consumers. The DREAM Act prepares immigrant youth to take on future leadership roles by providing them with the necessary education.

One of our biggest disappointments in the last Congress is that, though the DREAM Act passed the House for the first time ever and it got 55 votes in the Senate which, though a majority, was not enough to break the filibuster raised against it. The thing about the DREAM Act is that the students that it would affect never chose to come to this country illegally; they were brought by their parents when they were too young to make the choice for themselves. They have grown up here, have succeeded in school, and are eager to continue their studies or serve their country – this country – in the military. We can't afford to waste that kind of talent and commitment, which is why we were glad to see the DREAM Act reintroduced in the Senate in mid-May. We will keep working on this until we get it done.

Lack of Public Understanding

When it comes to the biggest challenges facing immigration reform, many people cited a lack of understanding by the general public and politicians in Washington about the importance of immigration reform. Robert from Athens, Georgia said:

The average U. S. citizen has no idea of the complexities involved in the U. S. work visa and permanent residency systems. They don't understand how the system separates families, creates uncertainties and day-to-day difficulties in living and working in the U. S. Educating U. S. citizens as to WHY the system is broken and how that is affecting human lives is critical.

Immigration is a complicated issue and because it gets to the heart of who we are, as a nation of laws and a nation of immigrants, the debate can get emotional very quickly, which means there is often a lot of heat and not a lot of light. This is why we value your input, and why the President asked people around the country to help him lift up the issue, by engaging their communities in a civil debate about the best way to move this issue forward. There are a lot of people with good stories to tell and strong cases to make about the impact of immigrants in their communities. We have developed a [toolkit](#) and a place for you to [give us feedback](#) so that you can host conversations in your communities and tell us what you learned and what we need to know. We believe that Americans are interested in informed dialogue instead of shouting matches, and we hope that many of you take up the President's call to action.

Challenges to Immigration Reform

Reforming our immigration system will not be an easy task, and we asked you to tell us what you see as the biggest challenges to reform. Jaques from Secaucus, New Jersey made an excellent point:

Our biggest challenge is to take the politics out of the discussion. If our representatives can forget their party affiliation and begin to think of what is really best for our country progress can be made. Fences and ditches alone will not stop the flow of the illegal. Investing in employment reforms and development in those underdeveloped countries will be the less costly and more effective solution in the long run.

We couldn't agree with you more. Immigration reform laws going back throughout our history have always been bipartisan approaches to challenging problems, and that's what we need to have here. What we hope to achieve with the President's call to action is a civil conversation on how to fix this problem that shows the Congress that there is room for bipartisanship and a sense of urgency toward finding a solution. America is at its best when we find ways to work together, and while this issue can be difficult, we think there is a real answer within our reach if we're willing to work together.

Nora from South Plains, New Jersey said:

There is no system that will please everyone nor be the end-all solution. However, to do nothing and ignore the plight of so many is short-sighted. We cannot compare recent and current trends to those of previous generations.

President Obama has said on many occasions that we can't afford to just kick the can down the road because an issue is difficult. Immigration reform is difficult, and it will take hard work and compromise to get the job done. But this is something that we have to do, not only to honor our heritage as a nation of laws and a nation of immigrants, but because it is an economic necessity. The Administration will do everything it can to bring Congressional partners to the table from both sides of the aisle to figure out where we can make progress; but as the President said in El Paso, we can't do it alone. Your input is important, and so is your engagement in the debate. We need every possible pair of hands and every voice in order to get the job done.

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