

For Asian-Americans, Immigration Backlogs Are A Major Hurdle

by Gene Demby

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Although the national conversation about immigration policy tends to focus on Latinos, it is Asian-Americans who encounter some of the knottiest challenges facing immigrants and immigration reformers.

Of the five countries with the longest backlogs for visas, [four are in Asia](#).

According to [a report from the National Asian American Survey](#) released earlier this week, Asian-Americans boast the highest proportion of foreign-born United States residents of any group — about 3 in 4 Asian-American adults were born outside the country — and Asia now accounts for the largest share of immigration to the U.S. What's more: There are an estimated 1.3 million unauthorized Asian immigrants in the U.S.

If you're trying to get a visa to legally enter the United States from an Asian country, you could be waiting for a very long time.

The federal government places an annual cap on the total number of people who can be granted visas from any given country. Most people who qualify for visas are sponsored by family members or by employers, and the wait times for a visa approval can vary dramatically. Karthick Ramakrishnan, a political scientist at the University of California, Riverside, who worked on the survey, said that the approval time for a family-sponsored visa application can be as little as a few months for a spouse or a child but can sometimes last up to 20 years for a sponsor's sibling.

"If you're looking at a backlog of 4.3 million people [waiting on family visas], it will take a while to get through the backlog," Ramakrishnan said.

The [current annual cap for all family visas](#) is 226,000.

According to the survey, about 54 percent of Asian-Americans said that the backlogs are a "significant issue" for their families, with about 4 in 10 calling it a "fairly serious" or "very serious" problem. Indians, Hmong, Vietnamese and Filipinos expressed the most concern about the backlogs.

When President Obama offered his plan for immigration reform on Tuesday, he addressed the long waits. "If you are a citizen, you shouldn't have to wait years before your family is able to join you in America," he said. Among other changes to the current system, his plan calls for raising the annual country caps for family-sponsored visas.

But despite the centrality the immigration process is to Asian-American life, changing the immigration system has not been a particularly important political issue. When the survey asked Asian-Americans which issues were most important to them in the 2012 elections, [immigration ranked far behind](#) the economy and unemployment.

But there's been a big shift in attitude, if not priority. In 2008, just 32 percent of Asian-Americans supported a pathway to citizenship for unauthorized immigrants. That number jumped to 58 percent by October of last year.

Ramakrishnan said that's attributable to outreach by advocacy groups. "Their voter education efforts have made a difference," he said.

"It's part of the general leftward shift among Asian-Americans," he said. Just two decades ago, he says, Asian-Americans voted solidly for Republicans in national elections. But by the end of the Clinton administration, that electoral advantage had all but evaporated. And by last fall's elections, 73 percent of Asian-American voters cast their votes for President Obama. (That's even though only about 49 percent of Asian-Americans [identified as Democrats](#) in a poll taken just before the election.)

"To the extent that they're paying attention to the immigration debate, they're more likely to see Republicans as shrill and out of touch," Ramakrishnan said. This process, he said, is a self-perpetuating cycle: The more Asian-Americans identify as Democrats, the more they adopt the party's liberal positions on immigration.

Bethany Li, a lawyer with the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, or AALDEF runs a clinic in New York City that helps immigrants navigate the time-intensive and paperwork-heavy process of applying for visas or deferred action, which gives a reprieve to people brought to the U.S. as minors. She said that many people were encouraged by the proposals put forth by the White House and the bipartisan Group of Eight senators.

"One of the things that both the Senate and the president dealt with was the focus on family reunifications," Li said. More than anything, that's what her clients care about in the immigration conversation. "I think they'll be the first to tell you that immigration reform doesn't mean anything if it doesn't include their families."

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