

# We've failed on immigration reform. Here are five ways to get back on track.

- *By Vivek Wadhwa*
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Immigration reform has been a quagmire, largely because of demands by Democrats for all or nothing. They [would not agree](#) to increase the numbers of visas for skilled workers unless the Republicans agreed to legalize the more than 10 million immigrants who are in the country without documentation — and did it on their terms. Democrats also allowed special-interest groups such as Big Labor to craft a complex immigration bill that is riddled with imperfections.

On Nov 19 President Obama made a [startling concession](#): He would accept a piecemeal approach to overhauling America's immigration system. "If they want to chop that thing up into five pieces, as long as all five pieces get done, I don't care what it looks like", Obama said.

I have [long argued](#) that comprehensive immigration reform—as it has been proposed—is not politically palatable. Both parties generally agree on the need for high-skilled immigrants. Both parties realize that the country cannot possibly deport millions. But the path to citizenship that the Democrats have insisted on is a deal breaker. Given that adding millions of voters to the electoral rolls could permanently alter the electoral balance of the country, Republicans have dug in their heels. Rather than negotiating or compromising, extreme elements of the Republican party will likely let the nation fall of a cliff.

The president seems ready to play a better game. So let's take him up on this. Here are my suggestions:

**1. The DREAM Act**, to provide basic human rights—and citizenship—to the [1.8 million children](#) whose undocumented parents brought them to this country to give them a better future. These children grew up as Americans, believing they were entitled to the same rights and freedoms as their friends. But, because they don't have the proper paperwork, they are forced to live in the shadows of society with limits on where they can work and study and on what they can do.

**2. A [startup visa](#) to allow foreign entrepreneurs to set up shop in the United States** — and boost innovation and create jobs. The Kauffman Foundation [estimates](#) that this visa could add 1.6 million jobs and boost the nation's gross domestic product by as much as 1.6 percent within 10 years. Not only will immigrants who are stuck in "[immigration limbo](#)" take advantage of this; so will hotshot entrepreneurs from all over the world.

**3. An increase in the number of permanent-resident visas for foreign doctors, scientists, and engineers.** [More than 500,000](#) skilled workers — with 555,000 family members—are legally in the United States, waiting for visas that give them the freedom to change jobs and enjoy the same rights as other Americans. Waiting times for these visas often stretch into the

decades. So these highly skilled immigrants are getting frustrated and returning home, as I documented in [several research studies](#) and wrote about in my book, *The Immigrant Exodus*. We are bleeding competitiveness.

**4. Provide temporary work visas for unskilled workers in non-farm jobs**, such as in hospitality, food processing, construction, cleaning, and maintenance. According to ImmigrationWorks USA's president, Tamar Jacoby, every year from 2003 to 2009, more than 350,000 low-skilled foreigners came to the United States illegally to do this work. She says that the only way to prevent future illegal immigration is to create a legal way to meet the continuing demand. Employers should have to try to hire Americans first, but, if they don't succeed, should be able to hire foreign workers quickly, easily, and legally. And she says that the new program should grow in good economic times and shrink in bad times, when more U.S. citizens are out of work.

**5. Expand the numbers of H-1B visas according to market demand**; relax the conditions on them that tether the worker to the employer; and allow spouses of H-1B workers to work. Silicon Valley is starved for talent. It can't hire graduates of the nation's top engineering programs because they happen to be born abroad. Yes, there are, as critics of the H-1B program claim, abuses of these visas by unscrupulous employers. But this is largely because the employee can't easily change jobs while waiting for a permanent-resident visa. Relaxing the visa regulations will free up the market by allowing immigrants to work for employers who pay the best wages. And it is unconscionable that wives of H-1B workers—who tend to be as qualified as their husbands—are forced to stay home, in servitude.

In a perfect world, we would surely provide a path to citizenship for the undocumented. We don't want to create a subclass of immigrants who have lesser rights than others. But even the comprehensive immigration-reform bill approved by the Senate defers citizenship for the undocumented for more than a decade.

The vast majority of undocumented immigrants want basic human rights more than the right to vote. They want the freedom to be able to work, pay taxes, and go home to visit their relatives and friends. Note that from the last immigration-reform measure, in 1986—which provided amnesty to the undocumented—only [40 percent](#) who qualified became U.S. citizens. In other words, the majority chose not to take the path to citizenship that the Democrats are obsessing over.

Let's provide permanent-resident visas to the undocumented and leave the issue of citizenship aside. One or two presidents from now, the country will have evolved further. I have little doubt that, by then, Americans will readily support providing equality—and citizenship—for all.

“We have kicked this particular can down the road long enough—everybody knows it,” Obama said Monday in San Francisco. It's time for us to act.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/innovations/wp/2013/11/26/weve-failed-on-immigration-reform-here-are-five-ways-to-get-back-on-track/>