

Main Street and Silicon Valley find themselves united around immigration reform

By [I.D. Harrison](#), Published: March 28

Not always concerned with the same issues in Washington, small businesses and technology start-ups suddenly find themselves united on immigration reform.

Small Business Majority, a [lobbying group](#) run by business owners, has released a new poll that shows an overwhelming majority of small employers believe the current [immigration system](#) is broken and support the recent push for a comprehensive solution in Congress. More specifically, three-fourths think the government should allow more highly skilled, [foreign-born workers](#) and entrepreneurs into the country.

“We have some of the brightest minds in the world coming to the United States, walking away with a skill-set from one of the world’s top educational programs, all so this talent can go back overseas,” Arnulfo Ventura, chief executive of Cobá, a small Mexican beverage company in Los Angeles, said during a call detailing the results of the poll. “It just doesn’t make sense.”

A bipartisan group of eight senators is currently putting [the finishing touches](#) on broad immigration reform legislation, which they are expected to release early next month. The high-tech and start-up communities have been closely monitoring the dealings, as they have [repeatedly lobbied](#) for changes that would, for instance, create new visas for highly educated immigrants and help foreign-born students at American universities stay and work after graduation — proposals they now hope will be included in any larger deal.

Critics of the bills, including some labor organizations, worry the measures would [help employers reduce wages](#) by hiring foreign workers, taking jobs away from Americans. The technology sector has pushed back, arguing that there simply aren’t enough talented engineers and developers to meet growing demand in the United States.

Meanwhile, for most employers at traditional [small businesses](#), those immigration issues have seemed to pale in comparison to larger concerns like taxes, regulations and the [health care law](#); consequently, immigration has not been on top of the agenda for those charged with representing small firms in Washington. But that’s changing.

Karen Mills, the outgoing chief of the Small Business Administration, strongly emphasized the need for immigration reform in a roundtable discussion last week with reporters in Washington. A descendant of immigrant entrepreneurs herself, [Mills](#) said that her grandfather moved to the United States from Russia and, following World War I, launched a small textile businesses in the back of a leather shop in Boston.

“I grew up with this notion that you come here, it’s the land of opportunity, and you start a business — and that’s still the way a lot of folks come into the country,” she said.

Mills later cited [research](#) that shows immigrants create more new firms per capita than native-born Americans. “We need to make sure that we continue that trend, because it has been a big strength of America,” she added. “It’s one of the reasons we’ve been so innovative and one of the ways we can continue to be competitive.”

Indeed, entrepreneurs born in other countries [started half](#) of the nation’s top venture-back companies and [more than 40 percent](#) of Fortune 500 firms, according to separate studies released in the last two years. However, the rate of immigrant entrepreneurship has [started to taper off](#), which some have attributed to strict laws that have given [other nations an edge](#) in attracting the world’s top talent.

The National Small Business Association, an advocacy group, has taken a similar interest in the latest round of negotiations. Most recently, the group endorsed the new Startup Act 3.0, which would provide citizenship pathways for foreigners who graduate with advanced degrees from American schools or start successful businesses in the United States. Lobbyists for the bill are now working to attach the proposals to the comprehensive package being hammered out in the Senate.

The Small Business Majority poll, which was based on responses from 500 [small business](#) owners, also showed growing support for legislation that would allow more low-skill workers to enter the company legally, though the number in favor of those proposals (64 percent) lagged those in favor of help for highly trained immigrants (74 percent).

An even higher number, 83 percent, said the government should offer more visas to students who earn advanced degrees in high-demand fields like science, technology, engineering and math. The survey has a margin of error of 4.4 percentage points.

Interestingly, while a slight majority of respondents identified themselves as Republicans, the survey results did not appear to vary by political affiliation, according to John Arensmeyer, founder and chief executive of Small Business Majority and formerly chief executive of ACI Interactive, an e-commerce firm.

That’s a rarity for polls on public policy, he added, noting that the two sides often have [starkly different opinions](#) on how to make life easier for small businesses.

http://www.washingtonpost.com/business/on-small-business/main-street-and-silicon-valley-find-themselves-united-around-immigration-reform/2013/03/28/5e117780-970e-11e2-b68f-dc5c4b47e519_story.html