

Obama, Romney Immigration Silence Hurts Economy

By Michael R. Bloomberg - Aug 13, 2012

Elections are inevitably about identifying differences between candidates and parties. To improve the quality of government, however, elections must also highlight areas of consensus where both parties, regardless of who comes out on top, can move the nation forward.

Immigration reform is probably the most important issue in the U.S. on which such a consensus exists. Yes, [immigration](#) is contentious. Republicans and Democrats disagree with each other (and among themselves) on the direction of comprehensive immigration reform. But on a host of significant immigration policies, Republicans, Democrats and the American people understand the pressing need for change. Those areas of agreement are where our immediate focus should be.

Economists, mayors and business leaders understand that immigration is a crucial economic issue, especially now. In fact, reforming a broken immigration system is the single most important step the federal government could take to bolster the economy.

In good times and bad, immigrants are dreamers and risk-takers. More than 40 percent of Fortune 500 companies were founded by an immigrant or the child of one. A Kauffman Foundation [study](#) found that immigrants were more than twice as likely as native-born Americans to start a new business in 2010. (Today, the [Partnership for a New American Economy](#), an organization I help lead, releases a report, "Open for Business," confirming that was true in 2011, as well.) Similarly, a recent study by the [American Enterprise Institute](#) and the Partnership for a New American Economy [found](#) that high-skills immigrants not only contribute to productivity, they also generate jobs. Among those employed in STEM fields -- science, technology, engineering, math -- a foreign-born worker with an advanced degree from a U.S. university creates, on average, 2.62 U.S. jobs.

Communities as diverse as [New York City](#) and Lewiston, Maine, and Perry, Iowa, have been reinvigorated by immigrant entrepreneurs who opened businesses and revitalized neighborhoods. [Standard & Poor's](#) found that [cities](#) with high immigration levels experience improvements in their credit ratings, tax bases and per-capita incomes. Yet while other nations are making powerful appeals to attract ambitious immigrants, the U.S. is stymied by outdated policies and politics. As a result, we are falling behind in the global competition for talent.

In [Spain](#), [South Korea](#) and [Switzerland](#), more than three-quarters of immigrant visas are awarded on the basis of employment. By contrast, only 7 percent of U.S. green cards have an economic rationale. Canada, with little more than one-tenth the population of the U.S., provides more employment-based visas than we do. Australia, with an even smaller fraction of our population, issues almost as many as the U.S.

The U.S. cannot retain its global leadership with self-defeating immigration policies. The competition for immigrant talent is too fierce, and the consequences of losing the battle are too great. Singapore's

foreign-born population has quadrupled in the past two decades, and even nations such as [Germany](#), with a history of restrictive immigration policies, have eased them in response to global competition.

What can we do?

For starters, we must demand that the presidential candidates and their surrogates stop using immigration as a prod to excite their respective bases and begin treating it as the serious economic issue it is. Neither [Barack Obama](#) nor [Mitt Romney](#) offers more than lip service about immigration's role in the economy. That's inexcusable.

Today, I'm meeting in Chicago with former White House Chief of Staff Bill Daley and in Boston with News Corp. Chairman and Chief Executive Officer [Rupert Murdoch](#) to discuss ways we can push the immigration agenda forward. If Bill and Rupert can find common ground -- and they can -- there's no reason Democrats and Republicans in [Washington](#) should remain burrowed into their partisan foxholes.

A platform for reform exists, with many members of each party prepared to sign on.

First, provide green cards to foreign students earning graduate degrees in STEM fields. We need these job creators here in the U.S., not taking their U.S. educations to other markets.

Second, increase the percentage of green cards awarded on the basis of economic needs -- 7 percent is vastly too small.

Third, create a visa specifically for entrepreneurs. If they succeed and create jobs, they should earn a green card.

Fourth, devise a guest-worker program for seasonal and labor-intensive industries. Farmers in Alabama and [Georgia](#) have seen their crops rot in the field because of state legislative and enforcement efforts to drive illegal immigrants away.

Throughout its rise to power, the U.S. was a global magnet for immigrants eager for nothing more than an opportunity to succeed. We need comprehensive immigration reform -- including a path to citizenship for 11 million illegal immigrants already within our borders -- to build on our history and build our economy. In the meantime, there are obvious steps we can and must take to welcome talented immigrants to our shores who will increase our competitiveness. The U.S. became great as a nation of immigrants. To remain great, we must remain a nation of immigrants. To do otherwise would betray not only our heritage, but also our future.

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