

# Senate group considers large reduction in family visas as part of immigration deal

By [David Nakamura](#), Published: March 14

Key senators are developing plans that would make it harder for the relatives of U.S. citizens to immigrate to this country, while easing the path for more high-skilled foreign workers, according to lawmakers and others negotiating an immigration deal.

The plans — which would run counter to policies that have been in place for generations — are part of ongoing talks between a bipartisan group of eight senators, whose bill is expected to serve as the template for a comprehensive immigration deal between Congress and the White House.

The senators agree that a limited number of people should be allowed into the country each year; the question is who those people should be. Currently, about 65 percent of legal immigrants are admitted for family reasons and 14 percent for employment, [according to the Migration Policy Institute](#). The rest are humanitarian cases.

Republicans would prefer to admit greater numbers of high-skilled workers, who business leaders say are in short supply and who would provide an immediate economic benefit. Democrats generally favor giving priority to family members of citizens and legal residents already in the country, saying they create support networks that help families thrive.

As it stands, spouses and minor children of citizens are given top priority, followed by unmarried children older than 21 and, lastly, married adult children and siblings. The emerging Senate proposal would eliminate the latter two categories, which add up to about 90,000 visas per year. Those people could still apply for entry to the country but would need other qualifications, such as high-tech skills, to be approved for a green card.

Senators involved in the negotiations stress that no final decision has been made. But Sen. Lindsey O. Graham (R-S.C.), a leader in the talks, said in an interview Thursday that tighter limits on family visas are likely.

“Right now you get green cards to adult children, to grandparents,” Graham said. “What I want to do is reserve green cards based on the economic needs of the country, and we’ll do something for families. But the goal for me is to replace a chained migration immigration system with an economic-based immigration system.”

The group of senators, which includes four Democrats and four Republicans, has said it will release a comprehensive bill in early April. The Obama administration has expressed support for the group’s general principles.

The proposed changes to the family system have angered immigration advocates, who warn that the move could threaten the chances of a broader reform agreement.

“Eliminating these categories would produce only a small reduction in visas while creating greater hardship for thousands of U.S. citizens and their loved ones,” two dozen members of the [Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus](#) wrote in a letter to the eight senators last week. “We oppose any efforts to further limit the definition of family.”

The family visa program has been largely overshadowed by fierce public debate over a path to citizenship for the nation’s 11 million illegal immigrants and an expanded guest-worker program for foreigners. But changes to the family visa program, which has a waiting list of 4.3 million people, would play a pivotal role in any agreement reached by Congress and the White House.

In 2007, some Democrats and the Catholic Church objected to provisions in a comprehensive immigration bill that would have dramatically reduced the number of family visas. The issue was one of the key reasons the bill did not advance in the Senate.

The issue has mobilized Hispanics and Asian Americans, who have been at the forefront of family immigration debates since the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which imposed stiff restrictions on Chinese immigrants until its repeal in 1943.

The current waiting list includes an estimated 1.9 million people from Asian countries, including China, Vietnam, India and Bangladesh. The wait for processing visas from the Philippines — which has the most family applicants other than Mexico — is more than two decades, the longest of any country.

“The point that we’ve been trying to communicate to the White House and House and Senate is, ‘Who are we to define what a nuclear family is?’ ” said Mee Moua, president of the [Asian American Justice Center](#), which has made family reunification a priority.

### **Part of a deal**

People familiar with the talks said that some Democrats in the group have decided they need to compromise on family visas to convince Republicans to give ground on citizenship for illegal immigrants. At the same time, Democrats are pushing for other changes aimed at expediting the green-card process for some applicants, the sources said.

Aides to Sen. Robert Mendendez (D-N.J.), a member of the bipartisan working group who pushed hard to support family reunification in the 2007 debate, declined to comment.

Rep. Michael M. Honda (D-Calif.), who like Mendendez has introduced previous legislation aimed at strengthening the family visa program, said he would push the Senate group to maintain all of the family categories.

Former GOP senator Jon Kyl (Ariz.), who led the 2007 push to reduce family visa limits, said the large number of illegal immigrants and low-skilled workers seeking to become legal residents and citizens should be offset with foreigners with higher levels of education and technical skills.

In the 2007 bill, some categories of family visas were replaced by a system in which applicants would earn points based on family connections, skills and education levels, including the ability to speak English.

“We’ve all been inspired by the Statue of Liberty,” said Kyl, now a government policy adviser at Covington & Burling. “But if you have 10 to 20 million people, many of whom are not well educated or skilled, coming in all at once, that does potentially create some problems.”

### **Grass-roots lobbying**

Immigration advocates have reacted to the discussions by starting a grass-roots lobbying effort aimed at blocking any reductions in family visas.

On Wednesday, more than 100 immigrants arrived in Washington after a bus tour to highlight family reunification and spent the day lobbying Congress. A House subcommittee held a public hearing Thursday morning on the hurdles of reuniting families under current law, and advocates will brief Senate staffers on the issue Friday.

“Congress does not have to sacrifice immigrant families, many of whom start their own businesses and strengthen our social fabric, at the altar of economic interests,” said Kevin Appleby, director of migration policy at the [U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops](#). “It should not be a zero-sum game. It would be salt in the wound if they gave them to the business side.”

Deepa Iyer, executive director of [South Asian Americans Leading Together](#), said that defining immediate families as simply parents and their minor children ignores the “people you need to build a support network. We’re talking about a U.S. citizen where the sister has a small business and wants to sponsor her brother who has the technical skills to help run that business. The fallacy is that folks think of immediate relatives not contributing to the economy. That’s not true.”

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/senate-group-considers-large-reduction-in-family-visas-as-part-of-immigration-deal/2013/03/14/90252aae-8be8-11e2-9f54-f3fdd70acad2\\_story\\_1.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/senate-group-considers-large-reduction-in-family-visas-as-part-of-immigration-deal/2013/03/14/90252aae-8be8-11e2-9f54-f3fdd70acad2_story_1.html)