

U.S. immigration policies: A little something for everyone to hate

by [Naureen Khan @naureenindc](#) March 3, 2014 4:15PM ET

The U.S. immigration system has been declared broken so many times by so many parties across the ideological spectrum that the it has become a cliché.

There are plenty of reasons. When the Immigration and Nationality Act was crafted nearly half a century ago to regulate the flow of foreigners into the country and set rules by which they could become permanent residents and citizens, attitudes were very different, as was the political and economic landscape.

"This bill we sign today is not a revolutionary bill. It does not affect the lives of millions. It will not restructure the shape of our daily lives," President Lyndon B. Johnson said when signing the bill into law in 1965 — just before ushering in decades of mass migration with profound cultural and economic consequences.

As various reforms and amendments — from establishing different refugee guidelines to making it illegal for employers to knowingly hire undocumented workers — have been tacked onto it, the policies have gotten ever more convoluted, as the legislation tries to balance competing priorities.

“What we’re talking about is an antiquated law that was written in the 1960s for an America that was much more introverted,” said David Leopold, an Ohio-based immigration lawyer and a past president of the American Immigration Lawyers Association. “Now our economy depends on international commerce and trade. We don’t have an immigration system that validates that.”

Here are the major issues in the current struggle over immigration policy:

The undocumented

At the crux of the debate are 11 million undocumented immigrants living in the United States. [Some crossed the border illegally](#), while others have overstayed their visas or violated the terms their immigration status in other ways. No matter how they entered the country, many have been here for years, raising families and establishing roots in their communities. Still, many live in the shadows, fearful that they could be deported, relegated to low-wage jobs that don’t require papers.

Despite the White House’s full-throated embrace of comprehensive reform, which would provide a pathway to legality for many of the undocumented, the administration has been criticized for its [aggressive deportation policy](#), often expelling immigrants for minor offenses and separating families. More than 1.9 million [have been expelled](#) since Barack Obama took office in 2009, outpacing the deportation rate under George W. Bush.

The borders

Conservatives argue that porous borders are to blame for the United States' perennial immigration problems and insist the top priority should be bolstering border security.

[According to the Migration Policy Institute](#), the federal government spends about \$18 billion a year on immigration enforcement, more than on all other law enforcement agencies combined. The comprehensive immigration bill that passed the Senate last summer would double the number of U.S. Border Patrol agents on the U.S.-Mexico border, add 700 miles of fencing and increase the use of drones to track border crossings, at a cost of about \$30 billion. Critics say the provisions are unnecessary and would further militarize border towns. They note that after hitting a peak in 2007, illegal immigration significantly slowed during the recession because of a lack of jobs.

Still, Republican lawmakers are skeptical about the administration's commitment to enforcing immigration laws on the books. GOP leaders have said that it would be very difficult to move reform legislation in 2014 unless that fear is assuaged.

Dreamers

The category of undocumented young people [taken to the United States as minors](#) by their parents and in good standing with the law have elicited sympathy from lawmakers from both sides of the aisle and have been a focal point in immigration reform activism.

The Dream Act, legislation originally introduced in 2001, would have provided legal status for roughly 2 million young people who meet certain criteria, including five years of continuous residency and graduation from a U.S. high school. But it has floundered in Congress for years and failed to pass the Senate in 2010.

An Obama administration executive order halted deportations of certain young undocumented immigrants in 2012, but the Dreamers, as they call themselves, are still waiting for a permanent solution that would allow them to live, study and work freely in the United States.

Business and labor

Businesses, from farms seeking seasonal laborers to high-tech firms searching for computer-science Ph.D.s, desperately need workers with certain skills in shortage industries but must wade through quota systems and bureaucratic red tape to get visas for those workers. Foreign entrepreneurs who have attracted the attention of U.S. investors and want to set up shop in the United States face similar barriers. And foreign students educated at American universities with valuable skills in science, math and engineering often can't get green cards to stay in the United States.

The need to make reforms that suit U.S. businesses is so pressing that it has united the AFL-CIO, the nation's largest labor union, and the Chamber of Commerce, the nation's most powerful business lobbying group — an unusual alliance that demonstrates the urgency of the issue.

“In the '60s, if you had a hardware store on Elm Street, you were competing against a guy on Elm South,” said Leopold. “Now you’re competing against a guy in Paris and Moscow. What we need is a system that reflects the international nature of our economy.”

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