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Let's Stop Arguing About Immigration — And Let It Help Us All

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"WASHINGTON, DC, USA - MAY 1, 2009: Nelson Navidad of Hyattsville, MD, holds his son Nelson Jose, 4, ... [+] GETTY IMAGES

With the 2024 presidential campaign about to kick into a higher gear after Labor Day, one thing we can be sure of is that immigration will once again be a major campaign theme.

Immigration matters for many reasons, but especially to the U.S. economy and labor market because:

- It is one of the two ways we get workers who can power our economic progress and contribute to the shared benefits that come from that—we “make” talent through education, and we “buy” talent to fill in the gaps with the benefit of people who move here.
- Immigration helps to seed the U.S. innovation advantage because immigrants are disproportionately represented in the ranks of leading innovators and paradigm-shifting thinkers who have helped transform American society.

But for more than 30 years, we’ve been stuck. Stuck in the partisan politics of immigration. Stuck on how to move forward.

There are at least two things that virtually everyone can agree on, however.

First, let’s face the fact that the U.S. immigration system is broken. No surprise there—because there’s been no meaningful change in that system for decades, despite persistent calls for comprehensive reform. The world has changed, substantially. Immigration has not.

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Second, there’s simply no way to avoid the reality that our economy needs more workers. The skilled labor shortage is real. In the

building trades, for example, [one in four](#) contractors is 55 or older. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce says there are [9.9 million](#) job openings in the U.S. but only 5.8 million unemployed workers. Meanwhile, [net migration](#) into the U.S. is the lowest it's been in decades.

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A new study by the National Foundation for American Policy also [reinforces](#) what we've long known: Immigration plays a critical role in the U.S. economy and enhances our ability to be innovative.

“Immigrants boost economic growth, employment and economic dynamism through their contributions to the workforce, entrepreneurial activities and purchases of goods and services,” the report says.

Canada has seen the light, recently announcing its new [Tech Talent Strategy](#) which, among other things, creates a new avenue for those in the U.S. who hold H-1B specialty occupation visas to find work in Canada. The new strategy allows these specially skilled workers to apply for a Canadian work permit, as well as study or work permits for family members.

“We’re targeting newcomers that can help enshrine Canada as a world leader in a variety of emerging technologies,” said Sean Fraser, minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship.

Canada is offering 10,000 of these permits—in a rare and ingenious case of one country creating an immigration program designed to benefit from the system in another country. And it could be a big success for our northern neighbor, given the [complicated, difficult path](#) that most H-1B visa holders face in trying to stay in the U.S.

I wish we had a sensible system for attracting badly needed talent to this country. Sadly, our ability to encourage greater diversity through immigration and harness the energy and drive that immigrants bring to our shores has been hampered by years of policy drift and outright hostility to even minor changes in the immigration system.

We need to get past that. It's in everyone's best interest that we consider the skills we need and find ways to match those skills to the work that's going unfinished. It's past time to make real headway. Too much is at stake to continue kicking the can.

None of this should be controversial or divisive. History has shown there's no safer wager, no wiser strategy, than betting on immigration. After all, immigrants made some of the most significant [innovations](#) in America.

There are so many examples, from Scottish-born Alexander Graham Bell who helped develop the telephone, and more recently Russia-born Sergey Brin, co-founder of Google. But I also think of former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, born in Czechoslovakia; and Hedy Lamarr, who came to the U.S. from Austria and achieved fame as both an actor and as an inventor whose work was later incorporated into Bluetooth technology.

Immigrants are often small-business owners, often fueling local economies. The ongoing contributions of sons and daughters of immigrants lift our country—economically, socially, and culturally.

Fundamentally, what we decide about immigration will have a profound and lasting effect on what I call “**human work**”—the creative, team-oriented work that AI chatbots can’t match.

Presently, however, too many people are denied opportunities because of their race, immigration status, and other factors. Getting the most from our potential, in human as well as economic terms, means promoting true fairness and helping each person develop their unique abilities.

I believe there’s room for optimism even in these polarizing times.

In their ground-breaking book, “**Streets of Gold**,” Ran Abramitzky and Leah Boustan, economists at Stanford and Princeton Universities, respectively, use big data to relate a compelling account of what immigrants really contribute to America. Their analysis contradicts those who believe that immigrants remain stuck in an underclass, fail to assimilate, cause crime, and take jobs away from U.S.-born workers.

Those who hold such beliefs would do well to take a closer look at the immigrant experience—from the immigrant perspective. The people who make it here often face treacherous travel, endure weeks or months in migrant camps, and arrive with little more than the clothes on their backs. Many must overcome language barriers as well.

Doesn’t their grit and determination—their willingness to meet every obstacle head on—make them among the most desirable kind of worker? Undaunted by difficulty, they *chose* America. We should honor that choice with opportunity.

The fact remains that we need immigrants more than ever, both to complement the talent development strategies we invest in via education, and to boost our innovation efforts in a time of AI and

increasing challenges brought on by existential threats like climate change and authoritarianism. So let's stop arguing about immigration and make it work for us. By investing in new immigration approaches, everyone will benefit.

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