



Democracy

TOPICS / IMMIGRATION

Building Bridges on Immigration

With fresh hope for progress in Washington, Carnegie Corporation of New York and other funders continue to support a united approach to fixing the U.S. immigration system

William H. Woodwell, Jr., April 15, 2021

From the Spring 2021 *Carnegie Reporter*

As the COVID-19 crisis wreaked havoc across the United States, opinion polls captured a shift in public understanding and appreciation of U.S. immigrants whose families and communities have been among the hardest hit by the pandemic and its economic repercussions. For example, a September 2020 survey by the Pew Research Center revealed that Americans were viewing immigrants in a more positive light. According to the poll, 60 percent of registered voters said newcomers strengthen American society, compared to less than half (46 percent) in 2016.

For immigrant communities and advocates, these numbers are an encouraging sign in the midst of

an otherwise difficult moment. However, the extent to which growing support for immigrants in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis will translate to more immigrant-friendly policies at all levels of government is an open question. The Trump administration's anti-immigrant policies and actions fomented deep divisions and left even deeper scars in immigrant communities across the land. Even in light of a new administration, pro-reform advocates say that lasting change is still uncertain.

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“There are real opportunities today for positive progress, but it’s only going to happen if we continue to invest at all levels, and if we continue to lift up and recognize our shared interests,” said Geri Mannion, director of the Corporation’s Strengthening U.S. Democracy program and the Special Opportunities Fund. She added that building relationships across lines that too often go uncrossed is key. “This is about reaching across the aisle and across the street and across industries and everything else, because that’s how people see what they have in common and what they share. And once you do that you start to create a chorus for change that is hard to ignore in Washington or anywhere else.”

Carnegie Corporation of New York is a longstanding philanthropic supporter of organizations and movements that are working to improve the U.S. immigration system in ways that recognize the power and the potential of immigrants to strengthen U.S. communities and the economy. The Corporation’s grantmaking reflects the life story and beliefs of its founder and namesake, Andrew Carnegie, who immigrated with his family to the United States at age 13 to escape poverty in Scotland. Since 2001, the Corporation has awarded roughly \$200 million in support for

immigrants and immigrant integration at the national, state, and local levels.

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GERI MANNION, PROGRAM DIRECTOR, STRENGTHENING U.S. DEMOCRACY AND THE SPECIAL OPPORTUNITIES FUND

For many years, the Corporation has supported multiple strategies to advance pro-immigrant solutions. One strategy is supporting grassroots organizations at the state and local levels that are pressing a ground-up campaign for change, both through the Corporation's independent in funder collaboratives such as [NEO Philanthropy's Four Freedoms Fund](#). At the same time, the Corporation has been a leading supporter of efforts to build alliances on immigration across sectors.

“Our theory of change has been that politics is always a game of addition,” said Rebecca Shi. Shi is executive director of the [American Business Immigration Coalition](#), a Corporation grantee that organizes businesses and business associations to promote “common-sense” reforms that are good for immigrants and good for the U.S. economy. “We believe success comes from adding allies and bringing in different voices based on the understanding that Americans and American business are broadly supportive of immigrants.”

As an adjunct to the economic case for immigration, some organizations take a more libertarian stance on the issue, advancing the argument that onerous restrictions on immigration limit people's basic freedoms and undermine the market economy. These groups include Corporation grantees such as the Cato Institute, the National Foundation for American Policy, the Bipartisan Policy Center, and the Niskanen Center.

Ali Noorani has led the [National Immigration Forum](#), a Corporation grantee for more than a decade. Under his leadership, the forum launched the “Bibles, Badges and Business” network in 2012 to bring together conservative faith communities, law enforcement, and business leaders in

support of immigration reforms. According to Noorani, in the wake of the 2020 election and the COVID crisis, the time is right for forging broader consensus on an issue that has for too long divided the country: “We are seeing real opportunities for engagement with communities that could really make a difference and move the needle politically on this issue.”

By supporting the alliance-building work of the National Immigration Forum, the American Business Immigration Coalition, and other similarly minded groups, Noorani said philanthropy has an opportunity to help break the logjam on these issues and to advance saner, sounder, and more humane policies that will help immigrants and all Americans.

For decades, reform of the United States’ broken immigration system was a priority that cut across partisan lines and drew support from a range of interests, including business. Under the Republican administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush in the 1980s and early 1990s, the federal government created new pathways to permanent residency for undocumented workers, expanded visa programs for temporary workers, and granted temporary protection from deportation to immigrants from countries that were facing armed conflicts, natural disasters, and other crises.

Following the terrorist attacks on 9/11, immigration was viewed through a predominantly national security lens. Still, leaders from business and other sectors remained strong supporters of common-sense immigration reforms. In fact, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the National Association of Manufacturers were among the fiercest proponents. Police, faith leaders, and others saw how the country’s failed policies were playing out at the local level and contributing to fear, distrust, and hardship among immigrant and refugee communities.

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Growing polarization has stymied legislative efforts to address the immigration standoff. The most notable immigration policy changes in recent years have been waged through executive orders by the Obama and Trump administrations. President Joseph R. Biden signaled a marked shift in tone

and approach when he proposed a bill on his first day in office to create a pathway to citizenship for the more than 10 million immigrants living in the United States without proper documentation, many for decades. While the measure faces an uphill climb in a deeply divided Congress, advocates are encouraged that serious reforms are back on the table — and they say the time is right for new investments in bridge-building, if only because of the growing urgency of the immigration issue.

How urgent are the problems? Undocumented immigrants and their families, who often include American citizens, face severe challenges when it comes to everything from finding a good job to a decent education to quality healthcare. Many live in fear of any contact with police or government. Meanwhile, the Central American corridor and the U.S.-Mexico border have become a chaotic and dangerous place for immigrant and migrant families and people seeking asylum. Children have been separated from their families, and individuals and families have been sent home to countries they were trying to flee because of the threat of sexual assault, violence, and death. To add to the problems, given the Trump administration's policies, U.S. systems for awarding visas for work and travel, granting asylum, and naturalizing legal permanent residents all are in various states of disarray.

Given how support for immigrants grew in the wake of reports of families being separated at the border in 2018 and 2019, it appears that a broad swath of the American public understands the failures and the inhumanity of the current system. To the extent that advocates can advance reforms that are seen as solving urgent problems, benefiting immigrants, and advancing economic growth, there's a feeling that the next few years hold real potential for historic change.



What Immigration Issues Do Americans Hold Sacred?

A new report by Corporation grantee the American Immigration Council suggests that common ground may be found by understanding how deeply Americans hold their stances on immigration more so than what those stances actually are

Jeremy Robbins is executive director of New American Economy, a Corporation grantee dedicated to “fighting for smart federal, state, and local immigration policies that help grow our economy and create jobs for all Americans.” He is also the grandson of Jewish immigrants who fled Russia because of anti-Semitic violence and pogroms in the early 1900s.

“I think deep in my blood that immigration is a human rights story,” Robbins said. “But to change the system, you can’t just make the human rights case. You also have to make the case that change is in the interest of all communities — and that means helping people see and appreciate the immigrants all around them, and helping them see how those immigrants make this a better, stronger, and more prosperous country.”

In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, the nation has a fresh understanding of how immigrants play a vital role in our economy and our communities. The public also has a new and more nuanced awareness of the systemic barriers that endanger the health, lives, and livelihoods of immigrants and communities of color. Turning that awareness into broad-based action in support of immigrants is going to require new investments to activate and align diverse partners in the decades-long fight for change.

“Any lasting and meaningful change, regardless of the policy issue, must be bipartisan, and I don’t just mean among politicians,” said Andrew Geraghty, program officer for the Corporation’s Strengthening U.S. Democracy program. Geraghty, who oversees the Corporation’s alliance-building portfolio, continued, “There will always be outliers, but at the grassroots level we need agreement among a diverse segment of Americans on immigration reform if it is going to stand the test of time.” This is an all-hands-on-deck moment — and it’s a moment ripe with possibility for immigrants and the nation.

William H. Woodwell, Jr., is a writer, editor, and communications consultant.

TOP: New U.S. citizens recite the Oath of Allegiance during a naturalization ceremony at Rockefeller Center on September 17, 2019, in New York City. Hailing from 33 different countries, 50 people officially became new U.S. citizens at the ceremony. Credit: Drew Angerer/Getty Images