

# Who Gets to Come, Who Gets to Stay?

Clarifying the Immigration Debate

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“Immigration is the sincerest form of flattery,”

— Jack Paar, TV host  
(1918-2004)

*This year, you’ll hear nearly every candidate running for any kind of national office – president, senate or representative – talk about fixing the country’s immigration system. They’ll comment on how important the issue is and how much they care about securing the border and upholding our values on immigration. Some of them will offer specific ideas for creating a better immigration system.*

*What they say will probably sound pretty good – they are politicians after all – but here’s a little backgrounder that can help you think through just how much to trust what they have to say and to help you evaluate which one is most likely to tackle this problem in ways you think will work.*

*Here’s what we have for you:*

#### **The Fix We’re in Now**

The basic facts – the very least you need to know to get a grip on this issue

#### **So What’s the Plan?**

Three different directions the country could go in, complete with important pros and cons for you to think about (and argue with someone else about if you like)

#### **Quotes to Consider**

Americans don’t agree on much these days – certainly not how to fix the immigration system. Here are what some influential Americans have to say on the topic – quick and to the point

#### **Starting Statistics (and Ones You Need to Know)**

You can let the numbers do the talking with our quick set of charts and graphs that will help you understand a lot more about what’s at stake, what’s possible and what’s pie in the sky

# THE FIX WE'RE IN

■ Six in 10 Americans believe that, in principle, immigration is a “good thing” for the country, but three-quarters (77 percent) worry that it may be too easy for illegal immigrants to come into the country.

■ The U.S. admits more than one million immigrants a year, and more than 12 percent of the U.S. population is foreign-born.

■ There are an estimated 11.7 million illegal or undocumented immigrants in the country. U.S. border agents say they apprehended over one million people in 2006.

■ Current laws emphasize family ties for admission, and most legal immigrants are, in fact, relatives of people already here.

■ Although legal immigration rates are historically high, they have fallen since the early 1990s.

■ More than half of immigrants settle in just four “gateway” states (California, Florida, New York and Texas). Increasingly, however, immigrants are moving to areas of the country with very little history of immigration.

■ More than half of illegal or undocumented immigrants come from Mexico and Central America.

■ Despite widespread dissatisfaction with the current immigration system, Congress was unable to pass compromise legislation in 2006, even though it had the support of leading Democrats and Republicans.

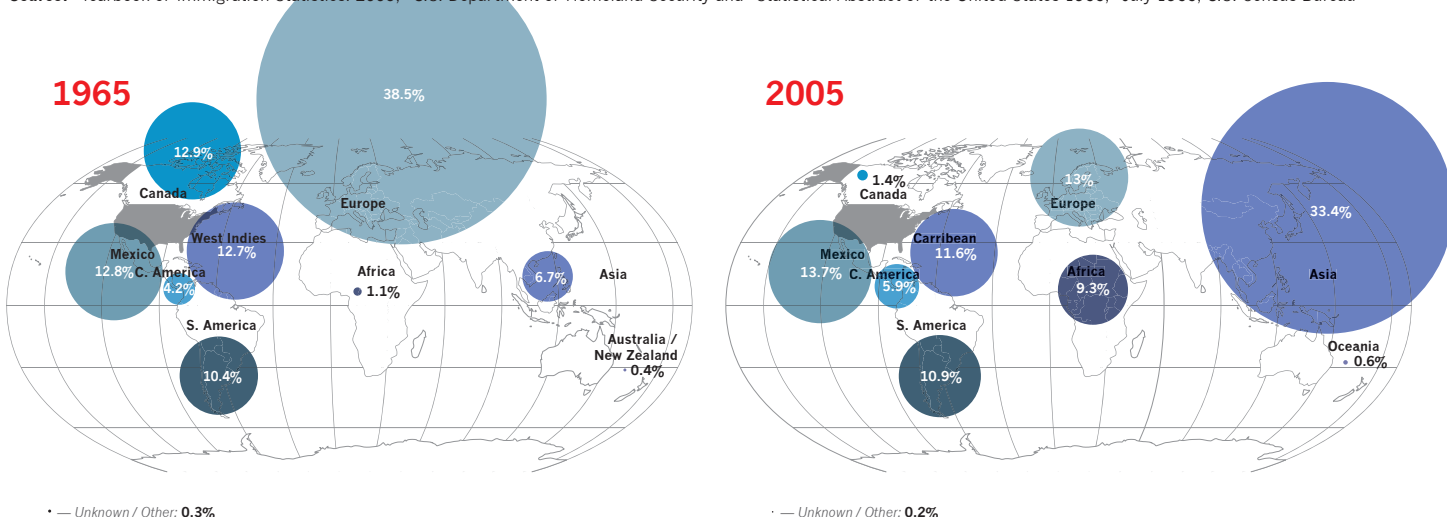
**Sources:** U.S. Foreign-Born Population, Census Bureau, [<http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/foreign/index.html>]; Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, Department of Homeland Security, [<http://www.dhs.gov/ximgtn/statistics/publications/yearbook.shtml>]; People's Chief Concerns, Issue Guide on Immigration, Public Agenda, [<http://www.publicagenda.org/citizen/issueguides/immigration/publicview/people-concerns>]

## Origin of legal immigrants

Legal immigrants, by region of origin, 1965 and 2005

**Note:** There were a total of 296,697 immigrants admitted to the U.S. in fiscal year 1965 and 1,122,373 admitted in fiscal year 2005.

**Source:** “Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2005,” U.S. Department of Homeland Security and “Statistical Abstract of the United States 1966,” July 1966, U.S. Census Bureau



# HOW WE GOT HERE

If you want to get people arguing these days, there's no better topic than immigration. For talk show hosts who specialize in showcasing irate callers and displaying how angry they are themselves, devoting a show to immigration, especially illegal immigration, is a no-brainer. The topic is so bitter, and Americans are so divided about it, that we seem to have decided to live with a broken system rather than compromise on crafting a new one.

In some ways, this is surprising. Everyone knows America is a nation of immigrants – it's a cliché to say so. The United States has long been the destination for millions of people hoping that hard work and freedom will secure a better life for them and their children. Compared to many other countries, we've been much more willing to put out the welcome mat. And yet as a nation, we still haven't made up our minds about immigration.

**Here's some food for thought that may help you think through your own views on the issue.**

■ The U.S. is now experiencing a great wave of immigration, second only to that at the turn of the 20th century. Yet this wave also comes at a time when many Americans are concerned about declining incomes, poorly-guarded borders and the threat of terrorism.

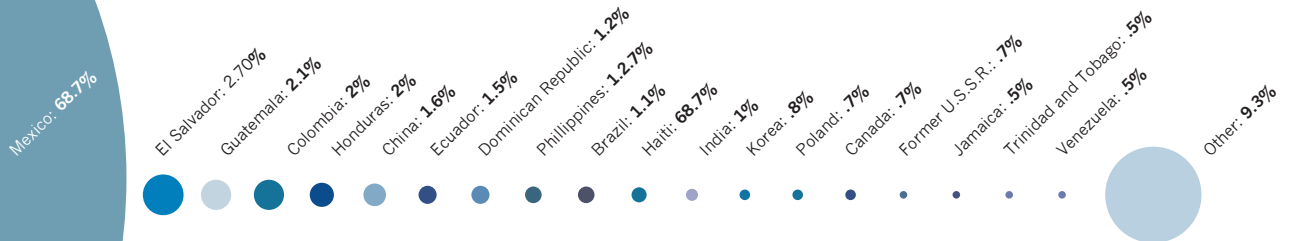
■ There are actually two issues. The first is what kinds of policies we should have on legal immigration – how many people can we welcome and how we decide who should come. The second is what to do about illegal immigration – how to reduce and what to do about the nearly 12 million illegal or undocumented immigrants currently in the United States, about a third of whom have entered since 2000.

*(Continues on next page)*

## Origin of illegal immigrants

Estimated unauthorized resident population, by country of origin, January 2000

Source: "Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: 1990 to 2000," January 2003, U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service



# HOW WE GOT HERE

■ There's often talk of deporting illegal immigrants which is what the current says should happen, but realistically, deporting 11.7 million people would be a massive undertaking – that's nearly the equivalent of the population of Pennsylvania.

■ Illegal immigration now amounts to about 3 percent of the total U.S. population. Over half of illegal immigrants come from Mexico, and most live in California and Texas.

■ Much of the debate over legal immigration revolves around the economic impact and the degree to which new immigrants join the American mainstream. Does the U.S. economy benefit from the talents of immigrants, or do immigrants take jobs away from citizens? Should immigrants be required to learn English? What benefits should immigrants receive once they're here? These questions aren't new. Similar issues were raised during the first great wave of immigration in the 19th century.

■ Illegal immigration also raises economic issues – particularly whether it brings down wages for American workers by giving employers a steady stream of people who will accept very low wages and poor working conditions. It also raises questions about how secure the border is and whether terrorists and criminals might take advantage of the easy access. There are also issues of fairness and the rule of law. What does it mean when U.S. laws are widely disobeyed without much consequence for those who violate them – either illegal immigrants themselves and/or U.S. employers who hire them? How should we handle people who enter the country illegally? If they have obeyed the law and built honorable, constructive lives since then, what should we do then?

Unfortunately, economists don't agree on whether the U.S. benefits economically from immigration. In some ways, the answer depends on where you stand. From a national perspective, there are pluses to having a large, flexible work force and younger immigrants to offset an aging population. However, in some local areas, high levels of immigration have meant additional costs for public schools and health systems. Even here, the answers are not clear cut. In some areas like New York and California, legal and illegal immigrants perform so many jobs – and so many kinds of jobs – that it is difficult to imagine how things would get done without them.

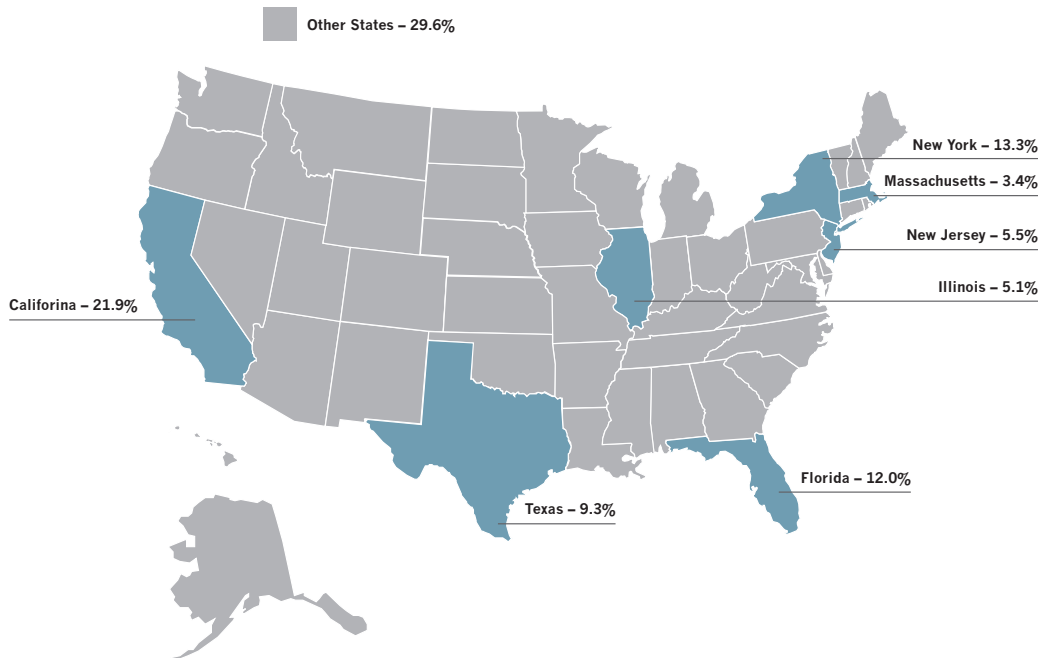
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## Destination of immigrants

Immigrants admitted to the U.S. by state of intended residence, 2005

**Note:** A total of 946,142 immigrants were admitted to the U.S. in fiscal year 2005

**Source:** "Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2005," U.S. Department of Homeland Security



# HOW WE GOT HERE

## The government has tried repeatedly to “fix” the country’s immigration system:

■ In 1986, President Reagan signed a law requiring employers to verify the immigration status of employees and granting amnesty to an estimated 2.7 million undocumented workers.

■ A few years later Congress increased the number of visas to 120,000 for certain categories of workers with needed skills.

■ In the 1990s, Congress gave state and local law enforcement the authority to help federal agencies crack down on illegal immigration – a role that was ratcheted up following the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

■ In 2007, a bipartisan group including members of Congress and President Bush proposed legislation to create a guest worker program and provide most illegal immigrants with a path toward citizenship. The legislation failed to pass, but a law was passed to build barriers along the 2,000-mile U.S./Mexican border, which would be policed by thousands of additional Border Patrol officers.

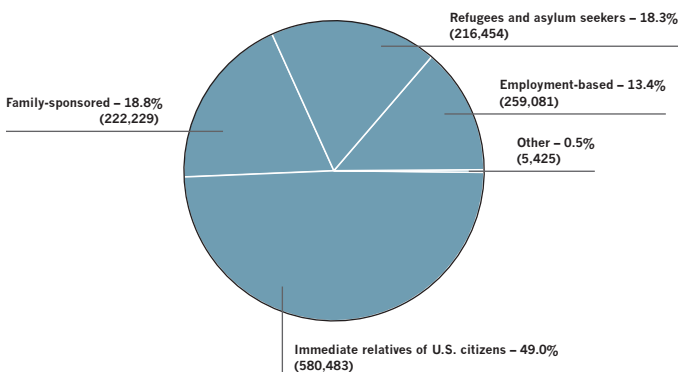
There’s a general consensus that the current immigration system is broken, but Washington has been gridlocked on immigration reform for years. Politicians tend to play to the extremes on this issue, because it’s the hard core believers on each side who are the most vocal.

### Reason for admission

Immigration admission by major category, 2006

**Note:** Immediate relatives includes spouses, unmarried minors and parents over 21 years old and family-sponsored includes unmarried children of U.S. citizens, spouses of legal residents and siblings of U.S. citizens

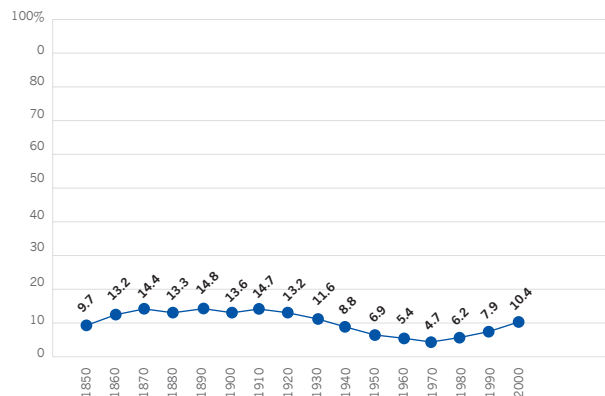
**Source:** “Yearbook of Immigration Statistics: 2006,” U.S. Department of Homeland Security



### Immigration rate:

Foreign-born population as a percentage of the total U.S. population, 1850 — 2000

**Source:** “Profile of the Foreign-Born Population of the United States,” December 2001, U.S. Census Bureau



# SO WHAT'S THE PLAN?

Here are three different approaches to reforming the country's immigration policy. Each has a different goal and its own set of tradeoffs to consider. The three approaches are summarized below and then discussed in greater detail on the pages that follow:

## The Three Approaches in Brief:

### Choice One:

**Dramatically strengthen the enforcement of current laws and reduce the level of legal immigration.**

Our immigration system is out of control. With about 11.7 million illegal immigrants living in the United States and nearly half a million new ones arriving each year, the current system undercuts American workers and risks allowing dangerous criminals and terrorists into the U.S. It's just wrong to tolerate the widespread breaking of the law.

### Choice Two:

**Reform immigration law to match the needs of the economy – bring in more highly-skilled immigrants and create a guest worker program for low-skilled immigrants.**

About 15 percent of U.S. workers are foreign-born, and over the last decade they have accounted for about half of the growth in the work force. Our economy just won't function well without them, but we need to adjust the system so that we really do bring in the people who can help us most.

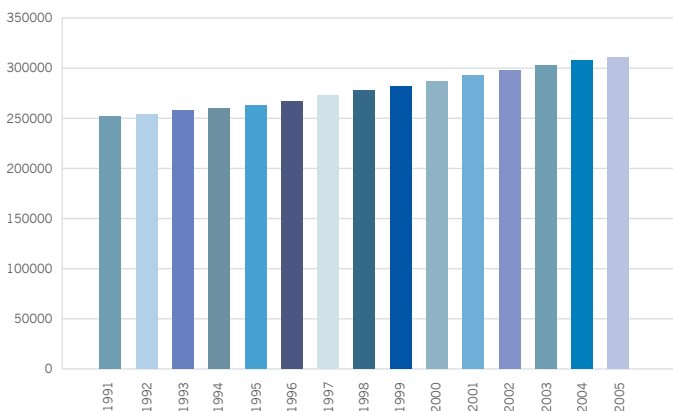
### Choice Three:

**Reform the system to take advantage of the enormous contributions immigrants make to the U.S. and give decent, honest undocumented workers a clear path to citizenship.**

The United States is a nation of immigrants, and our whole society benefits from having a human policy that recognizes the vast majority of undocumented workers have become valued members of our society. Plus, the country basically allowed illegal entry for decades. To suddenly pull the rug out from under people who have built good lives here is just wrong.

## Estimates and projections of emigration from the U.S.: 1991 – 2005

Source: "2000 Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service," Immigration and Naturalization Services



“The Senate failed to reach a compromise on immigration legislation, which would have allowed illegal immigrants who have been in the U.S. longer than five years to remain, while those who have been here between two years and five years would have to leave, but could return as guest workers. And immigrants here less than two years will be right back with your entrees.”

— Tina Fey

# APPROACH ONE: DRAMATICALLY STRENGTHEN ENFORCEMENT

*Our immigration system is out of control. With about 11.7 million illegal immigrants living in the United States and nearly half a million new ones arriving each year, the current system undercuts American workers and risks allowing dangerous criminals and terrorists into the U.S. It's just wrong to tolerate the widespread breaking of the law.*

**To get control of the situation, we should:**

- Employ more Border Patrol agents, build high-tech barriers along the border and make illegal immigration a felony.

- Pursue and punish employers who hire undocumented workers and require that employers check the status of all new and current workers in a government database. Employers who do not fire workers without valid Social Security numbers should face very serious fines.

- Require that illegal immigrants already here pay stiff fines, learn English and apply for citizenship. If they are unwilling to do this, they should be deported. We cannot round up

and deport 11.7 million people, but we can make sure that those who stay here have a genuine commitment to becoming Americans.

- Give notice that all future visa violators and other illegal immigrants will be prosecuted and deported.

- Reduce the level of legal immigration until we get a better handle on its impact on the economy.

**Arguments for:**

- It is dangerous and wrong to make it so easy to slip into the country illegally. The 9/11 Commission Report noted that several of the September 11th hijackers could have been detected and removed if immigration officials had enforced routine immigration checks.

- We've let immigration get out of control, and we need to establish a system where our laws will be respected and people who violate them will not benefit from their law-breaking.

- People are coming here for jobs. Cracking down on employers who hire illegal immigrants, whether they are large companies or private individuals, will remove the economic incentive to do so.

**Arguments against:**

- Drastically cutting the number of immigrants will derail the economy. Employers rely on well-educated immigrants for scientific and technical help and on less-educated immigrants to do jobs that Americans won't take. It's just irresponsible to ignore this reality.

- This massive crackdown will be costly and will end up pushing good people who are contributing to our society – both immigrants and employers.

- This violates a basic principle of our country. We have always welcomed immigrants, and our country is stronger and more dynamic because of it.

**Period of Entry of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population**

**Note:** variances in length of time periods.

**Source:** "Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: January 2006," U.S. Department of Homeland Security, August 2007

Period of entry	Number
2004 – 2005	1,330,000
2002 – 2003	1,240,000
2000 – 2001	1,590,000
1995 – 1999	3,240,000
1990 – 1994	1,980,000
1985 – 1989	1,270,000
1980 – 1984	910,000
<b>All years</b>	<b>11,550,000</b>

# APPROACH TWO: REFORM IMMIGRATION LAW TO MATCH THE ECONOMY

About 15 percent of U.S. workers are foreign-born, and over the last decade they have accounted for about half of the growth in the work force. Our economy just won't function well without them, but we need to adjust the system so that we really do bring in the people who can help us most.

**This should be done by:**

- Creating a guest worker program, so that employers who need agricultural and other low-skilled workers can bring them into the U.S. in a legal, but temporary way.
- Adjusting the number of legal immigrants allowed into the country annually to fit the existing job market. The number would be increased or decreased each year depending on the jobs available.
- Bringing in more highly-skilled science and technology workers, as long as employers say they need them. Our schools are just not producing enough people who are prepared and want to go into these fields, so these immigrants would give our economy a competitive edge.

**Arguments for:**

- If U.S. companies like Microsoft, GE and IBM can't get the highly-skilled engineers and specialists they need, we simply have to bring them in from abroad. Our economy depends on it, and these immigrants contribute enormously to our overall prosperity. The truth is that most Americans do not want the tough, low-wage jobs that immigrants fill, and our economy cannot run without them. The best way is to invite low-skilled immigrants here through a guest worker program. They will earn money that they can bring back to their families and communities in their own countries.
- Immigrants who come here to work pay taxes that are vital to keeping our government programs like Social Security strong.

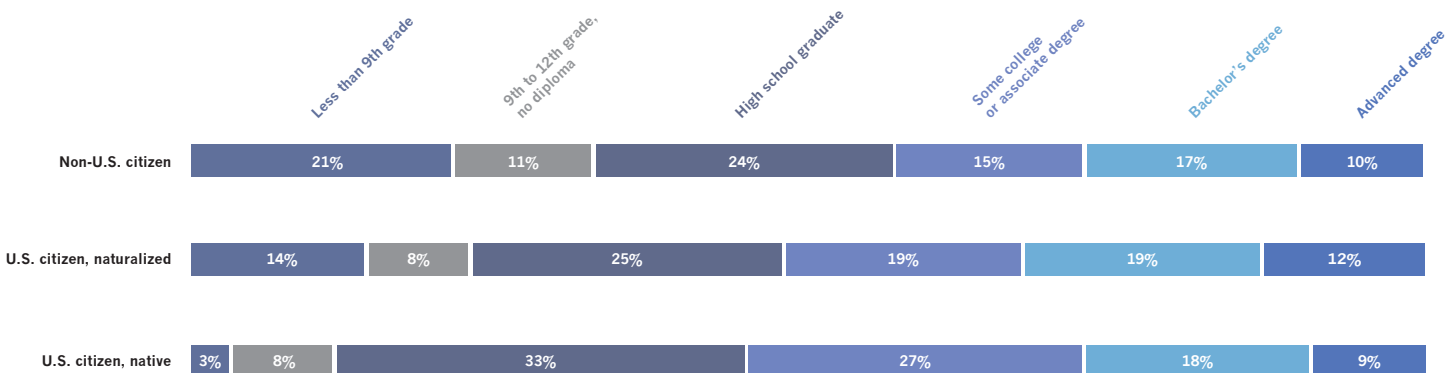
**Arguments against:**

- Many Americans are struggling economically. The government should not make things worse by inviting millions of immigrants to work for low wages and no benefits. It would be better to raise the minimum wage and guarantee benefits for all. Then Americans would be happy to take these jobs.
- A guest worker program just lets American companies get by on the cheap labor and creates an underclass of poor immigrants who will be a drain on local schools and health systems. Unless we really crack down on enforcement and border control, illegal immigration will continue to flourish. This approach does almost nothing to address this problem.

**Level of education: native-born compared to immigrants**

Educational attainment of native-born and foreign-born populations, 25-years-old and older, 2004

Source: "Current Population Survey." March 2004, February 2005, U.S. Census Bureau



# APPROACH 3: GIVE UNDOCUMENTED WORKERS A PATH TO CITIZENSHIP

*The United States is a nation of immigrants, and our whole society benefits from having a human policy that recognizes the vast majority of undocumented workers have become valued members of our society. Plus, the country basically allowed illegal entry for decades. To suddenly pull the rug out from under people who have built good lives here is just wrong.*

**This should be done by:**

- Passing a compassionate and fair-minded amnesty program that gives undocumented residents without a criminal record the opportunity to legalize their status. We can't round up and punish 11.7 million people who are our neighbors and co-workers. It just won't work.
- Increasing the number of slots for legal immigration so that foreigners will not be so tempted to enter illegally.
- Providing driver's licenses and identity cards for all those who enter the country for more than six months so that we can strengthen security and law enforcement.
- Ensuring that legal immigrants receive educational benefits – including real opportunities to learn English – and have good access to health care and other basic rights.

**Arguments for:**

- For more than a hundred years, immigrants have come here and aspired to build a better life for their families. How can we deny to others the opportunity that brought our own families here?
- The United States is a beacon of hope around the world. Though we struggle with our share of prejudice and racism, we have managed to mold a united country with shared values of freedom and equality. It's something to take pride in, not something to fight against.

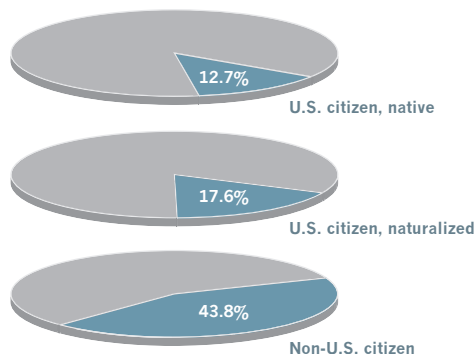
- Legal immigrants pay taxes and contribute to Social Security. Because of immigration, the U.S. is substantially better off than many European countries where the population is aging so dramatically.
- Most immigrants show a genuine appreciation for this country and want to be part of it. Often, immigrants understand the true value of freedom and opportunity better than many native-born Americans.
- This choice does almost nothing to address the lax border enforcement. We live in a dangerous world, and no country can afford to let tens of thousands of people enter each year illegally.
- We aren't even taking good care of the educational and healthcare needs of our own citizens. We just cannot afford to help everyone who wants to come here.

**Arguments against:**

- Amnesty programs have been tried before and only encourage more illegal immigration. What message are we sending when we reward people for breaking the law? Is it fair to those people who have followed the rules and are still waiting their turn to get here?
- Providing immigrants with basically an open-door policy and generous public services will turn the United States into a magnet for the world's poor.

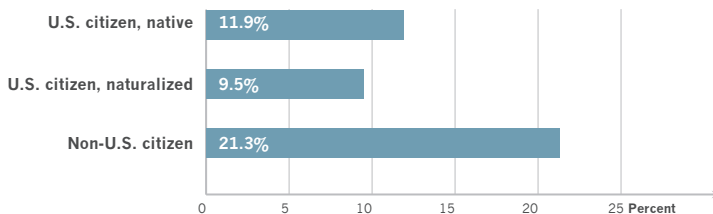
**Health insurance status: native-born compared to immigrants**  
Percentage of each group without health insurance, 2007

Source: "Income, Poverty and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2007," August 2008, U.S. Census Bureau



**Poverty status: native-born compared to immigrants**  
Percentage of each group below the poverty level, 2007

Source: "Income, Poverty and Health Insurance Coverage in the United States: 2007," August 2008, U.S. Census Bureau



# QUOTES TO CONSIDER

*Think everyone agrees on the problem and what to do about it? Here's a sampling of what some very different Americans have to say about the issue:*



'We've never taken the position that you shouldn't enforce the law. What we've said is, in a time of limited resources, we should prioritize our enforcement. At a time when we don't have the resources to go after criminals, we're going after legitimate businesses and workers instead. That doesn't make sense.'

— **Mayor of Los Angeles  
Antonio Villaraigosa**



'The indifference of the Executive Branch to enforce our laws invites a worsening of this failure... employers have no deterrent for hiring illegal immigrants because there is little if any enforcement, investigation or prosecution, for doing so.'

— **Mississippi Congressman  
Chip Pickering, R-M.S.**



'American competitiveness also requires immigration reforms that reflect the importance of highly skilled foreign-born employees. Demand for specialized technical skills has long exceeded the supply of native-born workers with advanced degrees, and scientists and engineers from other countries fill this gap. This issue has reached a crisis point.'

— **Bill Gates**



'The research is clear. An increase in immigration leads to an increase in poverty. If we truly want to do something about poverty in Colorado and our nation, we must stop importing poverty. We must begin enforcing the laws, primarily against hiring illegal aliens, which will force self-deportation of others in that category.'

— **Congressman Tom Tancredo, R-C.O.**

'While we support the right of the government to enforce the law and protect the national security interests of the United States, we recognize that our existing complex and unworkable immigration system has made it nearly impossible for many immigrants – who seek to support their families or reunite with loved ones – to achieve legal status. Reforming the immigration system to address this reality would allow the U.S. government to focus its enforcement efforts on real threats that face all Americans – citizens and immigrants alike.'

— **Interfaith Statement in Support  
of Comprehensive Immigration  
Reform, 2005**

The Voter's Survival Kit was written by Scott Bittle and Jean Johnson of Public Agenda, co-authors of "Where Does the Money Go: Your Guided Tour to the Federal Budget Crisis" HarperCollins, 2008. We had invaluable help from Andrew Yarrow, Jenny Choi, Francie Grace, Aviva Gutnick, Peiting Chen and David White.

Public Agenda is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working to strengthen our democracy's capacity to tackle tough issues. We want to ensure the public's views are represented in decision-making and that citizens have the tools and information they need to grapple with the critical challenges of the day. We conduct public opinion research, we run public engagement programs around the country, and we run this Web site to give both citizens and leaders the information they need to know.

Our voter guides are designed to help you make sense of what politicians are saying, at least when it comes to the critical issues facing our country. We lay out some key facts along with different points of view about how to address the issue. Each comes with some potential costs and tradeoffs – because every plan has both pros and cons, and a voter should face both honestly. Public Agenda isn't pushing a particular solution, so whatever you decide is okay with us. But it'll be easier to judge the candidates once you've considered where you want the country to go in the next four years – and what you're willing to do to get there.

Funding for the Voter's Survival Kit was provided by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

You can find out more about Public Agenda at [www.publicagenda.org](http://www.publicagenda.org).



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*Some of the key sources for Who Gets to Come, Who Gets to Stay? are:*

**U.S. Foreign-Born Population, Census Bureau**

<http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/foreign/index.html>

**Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, Department of Homeland Security,**

<http://www.dhs.gov/ximgtn/statistics/publications/yearbook.shtm>

**People's Chief Concerns, Issue Guide on Immigration, Public Agenda**

<http://www.publicagenda.org/citizen/issueguides/immigration/publicview/people-concerns>

**U.S. Foreign-Born Population, Census Bureau**

The key source for how many people in the United States are born elsewhere

<http://www.census.gov/population/www/socdemo/foreign/index.html>

**Yearbook of Immigration Statistics; Department of Homeland Security**

The government's report on how many people enter the country every year, where they go, and what they do

<http://www.dhs.gov/ximgtn/statistics/publications/yearbook.shtm>

**Issue guide on Immigration, Public Agenda**

Not to brag, but we have one of the best online compilations of public opinion surveys on this topic.

<http://www.publicagenda.org/citizen/issueguides/immigration>

**Now That I'm Here: What America's Immigrants Have to Say About Life in the U.S. Today**

Public Agenda's groundbreaking survey of immigrants about their experiences in the United States

<http://www.publicagenda.org/reports/now-im-here>



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