

THE IMMIGRATION DEBATE

A dozen Penn State faculty experts weigh in on a complex topic that, for better or worse, has defined America since its founding.

Interviews by SAVITA IYER and B.J. REYES
Illustrations by JAMES STEINBERG





THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY'S HISTORY, PEOPLE

have come to the United States from different parts of the world for a variety of reasons: some to escape war and conflict, others to flee persecution, still others to pursue education and a better future. Immigration has powered the economic engine of this country and created the proverbial melting pot—but it has also generated tension and conflict. Today, immigration is a more contentious topic than at any time in recent memory. We asked 12 Penn State experts how immigration affects their fields, and how a shifting immigration policy impacts society and the immigrants themselves.

1

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

How has immigration historically played a role in U.S. politics?

ROBERT SPEEL is program chair of political science at Penn State Behrend, specializing in Congress and the presidency, and public policy.

IMMIGRATION HAS BEEN AN ISSUE IN POLITICS and in political campaigns in the United States since independence. There were the Alien and Sedition Acts under President John Adams in 1798, and in the “Know Nothing” movement in the 1850s, Protestants opposed Catholic immigration. In the 1890s, the Democrats were merged with the populist movement and tried to appeal to urban workers, but added a lot of Southern racist attitudes and Protestant fundamentalism to the party. This caused many Catholic voters to switch to the Republicans for about 30 years. And in 1924, there was the National Origins Act, largely to prevent immigration from southern and eastern Europe, due to concerns—particularly among Protestant voters—that that was changing the country. Immigration from countries like Italy, Poland, and Russia dramatically dropped over the following decades.

Prior to the 1990s, most Mexican-Americans in California, even those who were U.S. citizens, weren't involved in politics. Then a series of ballot propositions tried to restrict immigration—particularly the rights of undocumented immigrants—and there was a strong reaction against that among Mexican-Americans. Their voter turnout went way up. California, which had voted Republican in every presidential election from 1960 through 1988, has now voted for a Democrat in every election since 1992.

The 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, signed by President Reagan, provided a path to legal residence for millions of undocumented immigrants while also enacting policies intended to discourage future illegal immigration to the United States. Some argue that the law did not succeed, but it was at least an attempt to provide legal status for millions of people in the United States while also implementing restrictions intended to satisfy those concerned about unfair competition for American workers.



2

FROM BI-RACIAL TO TRI-RACIAL SCHOOLS

Immigration has caused major demographic shifts in our schools. Are districts and communities prepared to contend with them?

ERIKA FRANKENBERG, associate professor of education and demography, studies racial desegregation in K-12 schools.

ONE OF THE GREATEST PARADIGM SHIFTS I've seen in recent years is the change in K-12 schools from being largely bi-racial—that's black/white—to tri-racial: black/white/Latino. Understandably, this shift causes problems. The students can feel isolated; it's tough on their parents, who may not speak English; and the school communities—particularly those that have had little exposure to immigration—are generally unprepared to contend with the demographic change.

It's critical that local governments and school communities have both the knowledge and the resources to better integrate all students. We would have to have public discussions about diversity in schools, we would need diverse faculty, and we'd need to ensure structures within schools don't disproportionately hinder opportunities for some groups. My own view is that the curriculum in schools should be welcoming and representative of all students, and schools should make information available in all languages.



3

WHEN VIRUSES TRAVEL

We're seeing massive, cross-border movements of people throughout the globe: Do migrations pose a risk to human health?

NITA BHARTI, assistant professor of biology in the Huck Institute of the Life Sciences, studies outbreaks of measles and other pathogens.

PATHOGENS TRAVEL EASILY—we've seen that throughout history: Take, for example, the estimated 90 percent of Native Americans who died in the 1600s from smallpox, which was introduced to the New World by Europeans. Today, outbreaks of viruses like measles can have enormous impacts on communities where people don't have access to vaccines. Sometimes, diseases that were once locally or regionally eliminated can flare up again: In 2015, cholera spread from Iraq to Syria and sparked fears in Europe that Syrian refugees may be carrying the disease with them.

One current public health concern is that people are fleeing from places where the public health infrastructure has been compromised due to long-term instability. Migrants, refugees, and travelers may not have received routine immunizations according to the recommended schedule, or at all. They may have been exposed to pathogens that are rare in other locations. While these are logical concerns, banning immigration leads to clandestine movements, which often creates populations who may be unable or afraid to get healthcare. The combined factors of low immunization coverage, variation in background immunity, and pathogen exposure, as well as reduced access to healthcare, all increase the possibility that a single case of an infectious disease could lead to an epidemic.

4

THE ETHICAL DILEMMA

As an ethicist, what do you think lawmakers should take into account when formulating immigration policy?

EDUARDO MENDIETA is associate director of the Rock Ethics Institute and a specialist in the philosophy of global ethics and immigrant rights. He co-edited the book *Borders and Debordering: Topologies, Praxes, Hospitableness*.

ACCORDING TO THE UNITED NATIONS, immigration is a fundamental human right. It is enshrined within the 1948 U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights insofar as every human being has what we call an inalienable right of motility. My argument is that because we have an inalienable right to life, we have a consequent right to move, to go where we could secure our life.

There are approximately 11 million irregular or undocumented immigrants in the U.S. and nearly 60 percent of them are of Mexican descent, which is why we need to have an immigration policy that is attentive to its Mexican dimension and that addresses the specific needs of the nearly one million persons who came to the U.S. as minors. The contiguity of Mexico and our historical relations with Mexico are important: The U.S. colonized half of the Mexican territory, the U.S. has drawn from the Mexican population

to address labor shortages, and there are the familial relationships of generations of Mexicans that have relocated across the U.S. NAFTA—now in effect for over 20 years—has been disastrous on the Mexican economy, particularly in the farming sector, and is one of the key factors pushing Mexican immigration towards the U.S. The decades-long drug economy and paramilitary elements that it instigated also have wreaked havoc on Mexican society. But drug cartels and the drug economy are transnational, so the U.S. also bears some historical responsibility for this malady.

I think Germany should be singled out as an exemplar of what a nation can do when it assumes both moral and historical responsibilities for particular types of populations with which it has had long-standing relationships. I think that Germany's open-door policy towards immigrants fleeing Middle East war zones has set a new international standard, and this is even as the country has faced the resurgence of neo-Nazi groups.

5

TOWARD MERIT-BASED IMMIGRATION

President Trump advocates a merit-based approach to immigration, with preference for people who have certain skills. How might that help?

ROBERT BRESLER, professor emeritus of public policy at Penn State Harrisburg, is the author of *Us Vs. Them: American Political and Cultural Conflict from WWII to Watergate*.

WE NEED AN IMMIGRATION POLICY that serves our national interest, and at this point, we need skilled workers to make the American economy more competitive, as it appears we don't have enough "native" American workers to do the high-skilled jobs. As for the unskilled labor that our economy currently relies on: People say there are jobs that Americans won't do. I don't know what those jobs are. I do know that, if people were paid a decent minimum wage, many Americans would take those jobs. Businesses, though, are resistant to paying workers more. In addition, many upper-income Americans take advantage of cheap, immigrant labor. Taking all these together, we need comprehensive immigration reform that deals with both skilled and unskilled labor. Getting a sensible bill through Congress will require strong leadership and, in particular, a president who can make the case for such reform.



6

DIVERSITY AND THE LAW

Penn State offers a one-year Master of Law program, with students in this year's class coming from 30 countries. Why is international diversity such an area of emphasis?

STEPHEN BARNES is associate dean for graduate and international programs in the Dickinson School of Law.

THE CURRICULUM IN THE MASTER OF LAW program is specifically designed for the international lawyer—students from outside the United States who already have an undergraduate degree and are already lawyers. It's for those who wish to gain a broader understanding of U.S. law or to specialize in a particular concentration—for example, arbitration, energy and natural resources, or intellectual property. The international students have a terrific impact on the law school and larger Penn State community. They infuse the classrooms and forums with unique perspectives on law, culture, and political conditions from their parts of the world. For example, if you're a U.S. law student in an international

human rights law course, students from the Balkan region, Iran, Sri Lanka, and elsewhere share their own recent experience of conditions at home. In a contracts or mergers and acquisitions class, our Chinese law students can speak firsthand about how transactions are conducted on the Chinese side of a multinational or state-owned company.

In the workplace, first, international students bring that prized bilingual language skill. That's big. Second, they bring knowledge of the legal culture of their own country. And third, they bring networks. For example, in Beijing, the general partners in these large international firms have Chinese associates, and they are invaluable in deals or transactions between, say, a Chinese enterprise and something in the U.S., or in Europe, or wherever. Similarly, if a U.S.-trained lawyer or an associate came over to the firm, then that new associate would bring more knowledge. There's a sophistication, and you need to know the laws of each country.

For the 2018–19 academic year, more than 100 international students from 38 countries will join the program—further diversifying our law school community. In addition to the more traditional alumni clusters in China, Europe, and Saudi Arabia, we'll have alumni concentrations in Sri Lanka, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, and Tunisia.

7

RACE AND BLACK IMMIGRANTS

Race, it's often said, is America's greatest unresolved issue. Does immigration compound an already complex issue?

KEVIN J.A. THOMAS, an associate professor of sociology, demography, and African studies, looks at the connections among race, immigration, and economic opportunity.

MOST BLACK IMMIGRANTS COME HERE via the Diversity Visa Lottery, which aims to bring in people from countries underrepresented in immigration. Like all other immigrants, their educational credentials are not recognized here. It's somewhat easier for blacks who get their higher education in the U.S. to find jobs, but even then, many can't get jobs matching their educational qualifications. There's a reason why there are so many African cab drivers with Ph.D.s in New York and Washington.

As such, it's harder for black immigrants to transmit the benefits of higher education to their children. Lack of economic opportunity affects where you live, where your kids go to school, whether they'll get a higher education. Poverty rates among educated black immigrants are higher, and this has implications for their children, who could turn to crime, for example, which will then subject them to other kinds of exclusion, so it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Changing these outcomes is a very complex process, but one way to minimize the downward socioeconomic trajectory would be to vet the educational credentials of blacks coming from other countries and give them some kind of recognition that would allow them to get better jobs.



8

ENHANCING BORDER SECURITY

Is there a link between immigration and terrorism that warrants tighter border security?

JAMES PIAZZA, professor of political science in the College of the Liberal Arts, researches terrorism and counter-terrorism.

IF WE TAKE OUT the populist/nationalist identity part of the terrorism discussion, then yes, it's very hard to argue against tight border

security, particularly in the context of crises in places like Syria and Iraq and mass migration from those places. However, unlike European countries that are accepting many refugees from ISIS-afflicted countries, and that have had terrorist incidents perpetrated by immigrants, the United States doesn't receive large numbers of immigrants from highly terrorism-prone countries like Syria and Iraq. The majority of immigrants into the United States are also highly vetted upon entry.

That said, ISIS still remains a threat, and because of the loss of their strongholds in Syria and Iraq, they're more likely to engage in transnational terrorist attacks to compensate. One of the issues with ISIS is that it doesn't plan and deploy attacks directly. The perpetrator of last year's truck attack in New York, for instance, claimed to be part of ISIS, but really was just inspired by their ideology and acted alone. This type of terrorism is indeed very concerning, as it is difficult to predict and counter. The smart approach would be to cultivate relationships with and within immigrant communities, as intelligence provided by people within a particular community can greatly help to find individual perpetrators.

9

THE IMPACT OF MEXICAN WORKERS

Many people believe that undocumented Mexican workers are taking American jobs and hurting the economy. What's behind this dynamic, and what should be done?

LISE NELSON, associate professor of women's studies and geography, studies the impact of globalization on labor markets in the United States and Mexico.

FOR MORE THAN 130 YEARS, U.S. employers have recruited Mexican workers to stave off labor shortages and improve the profitability of their businesses. These recruitment efforts were seasonal and generated circular migration, with workers regularly returning home to Mexico. But in the 1980s, circular migration began to break down as the globalization

of the U.S. economy expanded the number and geographic range of recruitment efforts, and employers required permanent rather than temporary workers. Efforts to barricade the U.S.-Mexico border in the 1980s and beyond also made circular migration costly and dangerous, inspiring migrants who had been circular to become permanent settlers.

Today, while a wide range of U.S. economic sectors are highly dependent on low-wage immigration workers from Mexico and elsewhere, there are very few legal means for law-abiding, low-wage workers to enter the U.S. Over the last 25 years, the contradictions between our economy and our immigration policy have produced large-scale, unauthorized immigration and employment.

To change this troubled system—and some employers I interviewed said they support this—we need national legislation that creates legal pathways for low-wage workers to work here, together with a “path to citizenship” for those who meet key criteria. Documented immigrant workers could then demand better pay and conditions, helping to level the playing field with non-immigrant, “native” workers, who are perhaps feeling competition from this undocumented workforce.

This kind of legislation would benefit both immigrant and non-immigrant workers, stabilize a range of U.S. economic sectors, and align with our country's moral values.

10

RETHINKING WORK VISAS

We read often about the lack of skilled workers in the U.S. and how difficult it is for companies to hire qualified candidates, many of whom are foreign students. How should this be addressed?

FARIBORZ GHADAR, William A. Schreyer professor of global management, policies, and planning in the Smeal College of Business, wrote *Becoming American: Why Immigration is Good for our Nation's Future*.

MANY PEOPLE WITH THE SKILLS that American companies require come from elsewhere to study at U.S. universities—but for them to work here, an employer must sponsor them for an H-1B work visa. The government allots only around 85,000 of these a year. Every year, the number of qualified people far exceeds the number of available visas, and President Trump, as part of his “America First” program, has signed an executive order that could reduce the number of H-1B visas.

No administration has come through with the kind of immigration policies we need to retain the highly skilled workers we're losing to new business destinations, and to places where the immigration process is more streamlined. We should take a cue from Canada, which has a system called “Express Entry.” Candidates fill out a profile with their skills and experiences, then Canada chooses from the candidate pool and grants permanent residence to the individuals it selects. This supplements its labor force with the necessary skills to benefit industry. Compare that to our current system, where the number of H-1B visas is arbitrarily set without consideration of skill sets, the needs of the private sector, and the economy, and you'll see we have a policy problem.

11

IMMIGRATION AND HEALTH CARE

The U.S. is increasingly challenged by having to support a growing aging population. If more people enter the country, won't that place a greater strain on programs like Medicare and Medicaid?

DENNIS SHEA, professor of health policy and administration, researches the economics of aging and the costs of long-term care.

MEDICARE, MEDICAID, AND SOCIAL SECURITY, which were set up when the Baby Boomers who are now retiring were of working age, essentially rest on the transfer of money from the working population to the older population. Of course, every person contributes to and takes from our overall economy, but health-economics studies show that immigrants actually contribute more to these programs than they take. For one, immigrants tend to be younger people of working age. Their taxes help keep social insurance programs going at a time when declining fertility rates have reduced the size of our working population. Studies have also shown that though Medicaid does serve younger, low-income families including immigrant families, it also supports older white people who, thanks to improvements in medicine, are living for decades with one or more debilitating conditions. In fact, the greatest expenses of Medicaid come from supporting older and disabled white Americans in long-term care.



12

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND THE JOB MARKET FOR ENGINEERING

How has immigration impacted engineering enrollment and the job market for engineering grads?

PETER J. BUTLER is professor of biomedical engineering and associate dean for education in the College of Engineering.

FOR FALL 2016, international students made up about 68 percent of our graduate students and 17 percent of undergrads. That's up from 4 percent over the last 10 years on the undergraduate side, and from about 59 percent on the graduate side. Most of our international students come from China and India, and they're not listed on President Trump's travel ban. But I think the travel ban is having a larger effect than just the countries that are listed. Some Chinese

students are thinking, *What if we're next?* There may be a general feeling that the United States is not open to international students, and if opportunities start to decline here, international students will go elsewhere. There already is evidence that Canadian universities are benefiting from perceived anti-foreigner policies; they reported record-setting applications from overseas in 2017.

Without international students, we wouldn't be able to meet the needs of the research that we're doing, and then downstream, the needs of industry and academia. Engineering is in a growth phase in terms of interest in technology, so I think we'll be able to weather these downturns as an institution, but we're going to have to put some extra effort into international recruiting, as many of our international students would like to obtain job placement in the U.S. after graduation, and I've heard anecdotal instances of companies being nervous about recruiting international students, because they don't know what their visa status is going to be.

From the viewpoint of universities, anything that would help international talent choose Penn State, or other U.S. universities, then travel to the United States on a student visa, and then remain here to help U.S. industries, would be a plus. Companies are just really hungry to attract the best talent that they can, whether it's international or not, because they know that all of the other countries and the international corporations are also shopping around for the best talent in the world. ♥