

# Trump Sets Up a Grand Bargain on Immigration

By GEORGE J. BORJAS FEB. 2, 2018



Demonstrators gathered at the Capitol in January in support of so-called Dreamers. Tom Brenner/The New York Times

To end the polarized and paralyzed debate over immigration policy, President Trump has [proposed a deal](#). The president will grant amnesty to an estimated 1.8 million so-called Dreamers — young people who were brought illegally to the United States as children — in return for (a) \$25 billion for a wall on the southern border and other border enforcement measures; (b) elimination of the [lottery](#) that distributes 50,000 visas per year, with a reallocation of some

of those visas to high-skilled immigrants; and (c) curbing chain migration by “limiting family sponsorship to spouses and minor children only.”

Not surprisingly, advocates on both sides have argued that this is a terrible deal: A wall is un-American and won't work anyway; the planned limits on chain migration are [racist](#); and granting amnesty gives the wrong set of incentives to potential immigrants abroad.

Another problem with the proposal, though, may be that it is not bold enough in dealing with the full expanse of our immigration policy.

Those who argue that the wall won't work have something of a point. Although a wall is a mighty symbol, and symbols matter, it's far from clear that a wall would stop illegal immigration. Nearly [half](#) of the illegal immigrants are visa overstayers; they might land at Kennedy Airport or Los Angeles International Airport with, say, a tourist visa, then overstay the visa and quickly disappear in this big country.

The only way to truly curtail illegal immigration may require that all employers use an electronic system like E-Verify to certify the legal status of newly hired workers, accompanied by sizable penalties for employers who break the law.

Those who argue that getting rid of chain migration is racist are just throwing scare words into the fire to choke debate. Our current system lets a new immigrant eventually sponsor the entry of her brother, who can then sponsor the entry of his wife, who can sponsor her father, who can sponsor his sister, and so on. Does it really make sense for one entry today to eventually lead to a visa for the immigrant's sister-in-law's aunt?

Finally, President Trump's proposal attempts to bring some economic sense into immigration policy. It would get rid of the lottery and reallocate some of

those visas to high-skilled workers. This is a step in the right direction, as long as we care about the economic benefits from immigration. But the reallocation of fewer than 50,000 visas would barely make a dent.

Perhaps a bigger objection is the three big issues it leaves off the table, and perhaps bringing those issues back into the realm of the possible would allow for a better deal.

The debate over illegal immigration will not end if Congress enacts the president's proposal. If the government grants amnesty to nearly two million Dreamers, there will still be at least nine million illegal immigrants left behind "in the shadows." Would anyone be surprised if there were then continuing discussions about how to package the plight of those nine million illegal immigrants in a way that highlighted their suffering and that forced politicians to pay immediate attention to their situation?

Those who have a gut reaction against regularizing the status of nine million illegal immigrants may need to bite the bullet. Their reluctance is understandable — our last attempt at an amnesty, in 1986, failed, and did not solve the problem. But there is little appetite, and rightly so, for deporting nine million people. Most of those immigrants have been our neighbors for many years, have stayed out of legal trouble and have deep roots in our communities.

Perhaps bringing them into the debate today would let us reach a better solution to the festering immigration problem.

The second issue not on the table is the realignment of policy for legal immigration on an economically rational basis. Last summer, two Republican senators, Tom Cotton of Arkansas and David Perdue of Georgia, [proposed a point system](#) in which potential immigrants would be "graded" on the basis of their education, age and English-language skills, and those who passed the

test would be granted admission. This type of point system is precisely what other immigrant-receiving countries like Canada and Australia do.

And, finally, there is the numbers issue. Exactly how many immigrants should be let in? We now admit about one million legal immigrants a year. The limits on chain migration might cut the numbers by about 400,000 and would closely align with the [recommendation](#) of the 1997 immigration commission led by the legendary Barbara Jordan, which suggested a flow of 550,000 legal immigrants a year.

The widespread dissatisfaction with immigration, and the political and economic consequences that reverberate throughout our country, suggest that the current numbers are not sustainable. The open borders crowd may also have to bite the bullet. Most Americans [have no appetite](#) for even the current levels of immigration.

So let's put *everything* on the table, including the legal status of the millions of illegal immigrants who entered the country as adults and changing immigration policy in a way that is more economically beneficial.

But let's also be realistic and acknowledge up front that the road to a deal is going to be very bumpy.

The number of illegal immigrants who would eventually qualify for an amnesty, whether they are Dreamers or not, will probably be much larger than current estimates suggest. Back in 1986, one provision of the Immigration Reform and Control Act was [expected to grant amnesty](#) to 400,000 farm workers. In fact, 1.1 million applied. When California granted illegal immigrants the opportunity to get a driver's license in 2013, Department of Motor Vehicles offices were swamped, with illegal immigrants coming in at [twice the expected rate](#).

Any attempt at limiting chain migration creates a new problem. There is a [waiting list](#) of about 3.9 million chain-migration applicants, and many have waited years for the golden ticket. Amazingly enough, some potential immigrants from the Philippines have been [waiting](#) since Oct. 1, 1994. Many people will think that we need to grandfather in those applicants. But that would require temporary rules that might allow, say, 400,000 immigrants per year until the queue was cleared out.

We should also be skeptical of claims that an amnesty to millions of illegal immigrants, many of whom have little schooling, or even just to the Dreamers, who typically have a [high school diploma](#), will be an economic boon. The amnesty is going to be expensive. The [Congressional Budget Office estimates](#) that the net cost of granting amnesty to the Dreamers (the additional expenses minus the taxes they pay) would run to \$25 billion over the next 10 years. An amnesty will be far costlier if it is extended to the entire illegal population, which is less skilled on average.

So the first step in any deal will be — *must be* — securing the border. A deal where enforcement is the first priority ensures that illegal immigration will be greatly curtailed, and this provision alone may well be worth its weight in gold. Past administrations, both Democratic and Republican, looked the other way as illegal immigration graduated from a relatively minor problem (the 1986 immigration act granted amnesty to fewer than three million illegal immigrants) into a major distortion of the immigration system.

A sensible immigration policy that generates economic benefits for Americans and for immigrants already here ensures that we can better adapt to the economic shocks that will visit us in the next few decades. And the best way to maximize those benefits is to filter the pool of persons who want to migrate.

Before jumping in to claim that such “filtering” is un-American, it’s worth remembering that anything short of open borders inevitably involves filtering. Between the 1920s and 1965, the filtering was done through national origin, giving preference to immigrants born in Western European countries. Since 1965, we have preferred immigrants who have relatives already living here. Filtering on the basis of economic potential ensures that immigration generates the largest possible economic gain for our country.

There is some concern that whatever deal the Trump administration reaches will be easily undone by the next administration. I’m not so sure this is a valid point. History teaches us that it is extremely difficult to change immigration policy. The stars aligned only twice in the past century: once in the 1920s and then again in the 1960s.

Given the nature of the policy shifts that some politicians tried to ram through under the label “comprehensive immigration reform,” it is not surprising that the label became loaded and maligned. Nevertheless, President Trump’s proposal opens the door for a truly comprehensive attempt at simultaneously tackling all the big issues that confront us.

Let’s build on what the president has proposed and address the lingering problems in a way where the benefits *and* the costs are shared by all those who have a stake in the system, immigrant and native-born alike.