

## Dole out work visas fairly

Op-Ed <sup>[1]</sup>

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This past week a bipartisan group of senators and the president put forth immigration reform proposals, and it seems they are all one big happy family. We all want more bipartisanship in Congress, but when it leads to both parties selling out the American people and no one speaking the truth, it is the worst of all possible worlds.

First and foremost, their proposal of “automatic green cards” for foreign students graduating with STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Math) degrees is anathema to the idea of American immigration and the bedrock concept that all are welcome who want to work for their American dream. A green card is a privilege and must be earned; graduating from college is laudable, but it is not enough to warrant giving out something as valuable as a green card as a “reward.”

With no nexus to an employer, this proposal sets up a new influx of immigrants who may or may not find a job. Yes, we want to encourage foreign talent to stay in the U.S., but we can do that without giving citizenship away. In fact, we have a system now that does just that, and with solid reforms, it can be improved.

The H-1B work visa gives six years of legal residency to people who work in bachelor or master’s degree-level jobs. We give 85,000 such visas out every year. Two particularly good things about the program are the requirements of a U.S. employer-sponsor and payment of prevailing wages.

One bad thing is there are no limits for individual employers, so every year big companies suck up the numbers, leaving small businesses with nothing. For example, the three top H-1B users in 2008 were Infosys (4,559), Wipro (2,678), and Satyam (1,917). Microsoft was fifth (1,037). While large companies monopolize the program, small businesses in cutting-edge technologies or specialty restaurants who only want a few visas, suffer the blackout. Maybe small numbers don’t mean much to elites in Washington, D.C., but it can mean the difference between a new patent, a new sushi chef or a new product launch to the small business owner.

A better idea Congress could use to show it is truly interested in job growth and support for small businesses is to limit a company to 4 percent to 5 percent of the total, thus widening the pool to a broader spectrum, and create a small-business category of 15,000 visas.

The current system of an employer-based green card also helps balance our need for foreign talent with our obligation to the American worker. If a person wants a green card, she needs a sponsor who must first try to find a U.S. worker for the position. On what planet does giving out *unearned* green cards address either of these challenges?

The conventional wisdom on immigration reform is that Democrats want voters and Republicans want cheap labor. Actually, both want both. Never underestimate the ability of both parties to put corporate interests above all.

The other common refrain we hear from Barack Obama and Democrats is, “Don’t let the perfect be the enemy of the good.” To which I say, don’t let a sellout to the mediocre be the enemy of the possible. We can do immigration reform right, but only if both sides get their ideas from somewhere outside D.C. and think tanks. Enough with fantasyland, get people from the real world with actual expertise and experience.

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