



Why America's Immigration Politics is So Contentious and Focused on Making Unlikely Grand Bargains

Dan J. Tichenor, University of Oregon

The United States is a nation of immigrants, yet Americans have been arguing over admitting newcomers and granting them rights since the earliest days of the Republic. Immigration politics has long been highly contentious and given to standoffs. When breakthroughs periodically happen, they involve complex “grand bargains” and unlikely compromises. Why is that? We can learn a lot about current prospects for reform as well as the past by locating points of view that have repeatedly fuelled pitched battles within as well as between the major political parties.

Dimensions of Disagreement

Consider two dimensions along which various groups and movements disagree:

- The first focuses on immigration numbers, and divides those who, at any given juncture, support expanding opportunities for large numbers of immigrants to come to the United States, versus those who advocate substantial restrictions on alien admissions.
- A second dimension has to do with the rights of noncitizens residing in the United States. Some advocate for new arrivals to be afforded a broad set of civil, political, and social rights, while others want to restrict the rights of noncitizens or even push them out of the country.

Locating groups on these dimensions illuminates tensions on the left and right alike.

On the Left, Cosmopolitans versus Economic Protectionists

Liberal cosmopolitans embrace the universality of the American experiment and profess deep faith in the benefits of diverse mass immigration. From Jane Addams in the Progressive Era to Senator Edward Kennedy in recent times, they have supported generous admissions policies (including family reunifications and refugee relief) along with many legal protections and entitlements for all newly admitted non-citizens. Today, major civil rights groups, Latino organizations, and national labor federations share this orientation and are demanding a path to full citizenship for 10-12 million undocumented immigrants. As Democratic Representative Louis Guterrez of Illinois puts it, cosmopolitans want the undocumented to “come out of the shadows of darkness, of discrimination, of bigotry, of exploitation, and join us fully.”

Economic protectionists, by contrast, oppose porous borders and soaring immigration on the grounds that they imperil the material security of the nation’s working-class and its least advantaged citizens. More than a century ago, African American leader Frederick Douglass supported fair treatment for all but also favored limits on immigration, lamenting that “every hour sees the black man elbowed out of employment by some newly arrived immigrant.” Similarly, much more recently, former Congresswoman Barbara Jordan made it clear that she too supported reduced immigration to provide economic opportunity for disadvantaged citizens and equal benefits for those already here. This view was traditionally also espoused by the U.S. labor movement, which saw free-wheeling immigration as enhancing the wealth of corporate and professional America with little concern of the consequences for blue-collar workers or the unemployed. Today, national labor organizations have shifted toward the cosmopolitan position, but protectionist sentiments still resonate among many rank-and-file union members and Democratic voters. Even labor leaders who endorse liberal tenets oppose guest worker programs and want strong sanctions against employers who knowingly hire undocumented immigrants.

On the Right, Free Marketers versus Border Hawks

Free market pro-business conservatives routinely support large-scale immigration to fulfill the labor needs of

businesses and promote national prosperity. During the Gilded Age, capitalists like Andrew Carnegie described the flow of tractable immigrant workers into the country as a “golden stream.” Contemporary business leaders and conservative politicians from Ronald Reagan to John McCain draw the same conclusion, arguing that the nation’s economy benefits from foreign workers willing to do jobs and accept wages that U.S. citizens would not. Today’s pro-business conservatives favor recruiting newcomers but do not want them to have rights to U.S. social benefits. Powerful business interests such as the American Farm Bureau Federation, the U.S. Chambers of Commerce, Microsoft, service industries, and numerous other employer groups defend imported labor as essential to U.S. global competitiveness. If immigration remains limited, they want flexible guest worker programs to allow foreign workers to come temporarily.

But the American right also includes **border hawks** who advocate strong border barriers and limits on admissions and immigrant rights. Historically, advocates of this persuasion fretted over shifts in the ethnic, racial, or religious composition of the United States, believing (in the words of Harvard President A. Lawrence Lowell) that “the need for homogeneity in a democracy” justifies policies “resisting the influx of great numbers of a greatly different race.” Today these cultural anxieties are tied to charges that newcomers threaten national security and take jobs and benefits from citizens. Accordingly, Tea Partiers among rank and file Republicans call for tougher entry controls and hope for targeted deportations coupled with the denial of public benefits to prod undocumented residents to leave. They want to preserve an older America.

Stalemates and Occasional Grand Bargains

All of these cross-cutting ideological traditions are still with us and strongly affect today’s highly fraught immigration politics. Rival interests and ideals within each major party make majority coalitions in Congress elusive – and legislative pushes often bog down into frustrating stalemates after prolonged debate. To achieve important policy breakthroughs at all, legislative leaders must broker incongruous alliances. Strange bedfellow coalitions like today’s Senate “Gang of Eight” – which brings together cosmopolitan Democrats and pro-business conservatives – have been a defining feature of U.S. immigration reform politics for more than a century.

When significant reform breakthroughs happen at all, they usually codify “grand bargains” that bring together mutually wary allies with disparate goals. That is why, in 2013, Congress is debating bills that, if they pass, will marry some sort of path to citizenship demanded by liberal cosmopolitans with guest worker programs preferred by business conservatives and beefed up border barriers that might appease some preservationist conservatives in the Republican Party. Legislation may not happen at all; and if it does, it will, as usual, embody quite a mish-mash.