

## THE OPPENHEIMER REPORT

# MIGRANT PLAN STACKS DECK AGAINST LATINOS

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Here's some little-noticed potential fallout of the immigration reform package being debated in the U.S. Congress: Its merit-based admissions criteria may favor Asian immigrants over Latin Americans.

Under the bipartisan immigration overhaul bill, foreigners seeking legal status in the United States would be selected through a point system based on their levels of education, proficiency in English and occupation. Which means that we would roll out a red carpet for Indian engineers, while making it harder for Mexican gardeners to achieve the American dream. Until now, the immigration system has been largely based on family-reunification requests and employers' sponsorships. But, by introducing a point system that would make it easier for well-educated, English-speaking foreigners to become permanent immigrants, the new admissions process would smack of racial and intellectual engineering.

It would also hurt Latin American economies -- creating even greater immigration pressures in the future -- and may lead to a shortage of low-skilled workers in the United States.

Consider the educational background of most immigrants who have arrived in the United States since 1990, according to a new study by the Migration Policy Institute:

- More than 76 percent of all immigrants from India have at least a bachelor's degree, as well as 52 percent from China, 62 percent from South Korea and 51 percent from the Philippines.
- By comparison, 61 percent of Mexican immigrants, 62 percent of Salvadoran immigrants and 66 percent of Guatemalan immigrants have not completed high school.
- Education levels of South American immigrants are somewhat higher -- nearly 40 percent of Colombians, 31 percent of Peruvians and 49 percent of Venezuelans have at least a bachelor's degree -- but still below that of their Asian counterparts.

### ENGLISH NUMBERS

When it comes to proficiency in English, 70 percent of all immigrants from India, 59 percent from the Philippines and 26 percent from South Korea speak fluent English. By comparison, only 12 percent of immigrants from Mexico and 15 percent from El Salvador speak English fluently.

"Clearly, the point system would disadvantage immigrants from Latin America," says Douglas Rivlin, a spokesman for the National Immigration Forum, a pro-immigration group in Washington. "It's heavily weighted toward higher education levels and doesn't take into account the need for lower-skilled workers."

Pro-immigration advocates note that, as the U.S. population grows older and the labor force pool shrinks in a near full-employment economy, there will soon be more shortages of agricultural laborers, construction workers and waiters than of white-collar workers.

The National Restaurant Association projects that its labor force of 12.8 million will grow by 15 percent over the next 10 years, but the U.S. government estimates that the overall U.S. workforce will grow by only 10 percent.

"We are worried that we will not be able to find enough workers," says John Gay, a senior National Restaurant Association official.

Won't Americans fill those jobs if you raise your wages, I asked him. No, he answered. "The average construction worker makes \$21 an hour, and there is a shortage of workers in the construction industry," he said.

My opinion: The United States would be better off providing more similar paths to permanent citizenship to both highly skilled and low-skilled workers.

Why low-skilled workers? First, the U.S. will need them. Second, if we rely mostly on temporary workers for low-end jobs, they will stay in the country anyway, and we will be creating an underclass of disenfranchised people. (Think of the 2005 riots by Muslim youths in Paris, and you'll get the idea.)

### **FORGET FENCE**

Third, and most important, because if instead of helping boost Latin American and Caribbean economies we close the door and reduce the \$65 billion their migrants send home in remittances every year, we will be paving the way for greater economic hardship in the region and even greater unchecked emigration in the future. (And if you think that a border fence will keep them out, you are kidding yourself: They will circumvent it, or dynamite it, if necessary.)

In the long run, the only way to slow the immigration flow will be helping promote development in Latin America.

In the meantime, while the proposed immigration package is overall a positive in that it provides a path to legalization to millions of undocumented workers, its point system should be reshuffled.

It's OK to give special treatment to Indian engineers at the top of the education ladder, but we should also grant fast admission to those at the bottom.