

WISCONSIN

Turning Challenges Into Opportunities

**PERSPECTIVES ON IMMIGRATION IN TEXAS AND
WISCONSIN DURING THE 2020 ELECTION YEAR**

Introduction

The conclusion of the 2020 presidential campaign capped off one of the most contentious periods in the U.S. immigration policy debate. President Donald Trump and his supporters used rhetoric that presents immigration and immigrants as a threat to the United States. The Trump administration also introduced executive actions that sought to limit employment- and family-based immigration, limited asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border, and created tensions with state and local officials around immigration enforcement. Conversely, critics of the administration have taken hard lines in response, calling for an end to immigration enforcement and

litigation against the administration's policies. On cable news and social media, the sides in the immigration debate seem irreconcilable. Despite these divisions, the Bipartisan Policy Center's work has found that a broad consensus around immigration and immigration reform does exist among voters, especially when it comes to fixing a broken immigration system.¹

In May and June 2020, the BPC hosted six virtual roundtables—four in partnership with the Wisconsin Institute of Public Policy and Service and two with the Center for Houston's Future—to further our understanding of how local community leaders viewed the immigration issue being debated nationally.^a The meetings, which each had three to nine attendees from different racial and immigrant backgrounds representing government, private sector, and non-profit organizations in Wisconsin and Texas, sought to understand how these stakeholders viewed immigration.

- First, the moderator gathered the participants' perspectives about the challenges and benefits immigration presents their communities.
- The discussion continued by examining the participants' views about the divisions of opinions about immigration in their communities and in the country and ways to mend these divides.
- Finally, the discussions allowed the participants to identify problems with the current U.S. immigration system and provide suggestions to fix them.

Overall, the participants agreed on immigration issues more than the polarities of the public debate suggest, and they also agreed that developing policy around compromise and consensus remains the most viable route to fix the U.S. immigration system and heal partisan divides over immigration.

a All roundtables were conducted under Chatham House rules to allow for candid conversation, and quotes are used without direct reference to the individuals making them. The opinions, findings, and analysis expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views or opinions of the Center for Houston's Future, the Wisconsin Institute for Public Policy and Service, or the Bipartisan Policy Center.

Part 1: The Benefits and Challenges of Immigration

The stakeholder roundtables in Texas and Wisconsin—two key electoral states where immigration has been a significant public policy issue—revealed that immigration presents both benefits and challenges to their communities. The participants noted that immigrants at all skill levels fill workforce needs in sectors critical to their local economies, such as agriculture and health care. Furthermore, the participants also said immigrants bring diversity to their communities, which can make the region more attractive to newcomers. However, the discussions also revealed these communities struggle with managing the arrival of immigrants. For instance, participants indicated an influx of new immigrants sometimes create tensions around demographic changes in some communities, especially in areas that have remained culturally homogenous for several decades.

The stakeholders consistently viewed immigrants as positive contributors to their local economies. In particular, immigrants helped fill labor shortages across a variety of economic sectors. “Wisconsin is America’s dairy land, and you can’t separate that. The [agriculture] industry, for those in it, would die if it were not for immigrants. I don’t think people get that,” said one woman. Another man in the same event agreed, explaining that immigrants—including undocumented ones—contribute to rural Wisconsin’s agriculture, forestry, meat processing industries, and the country’s Social Security system:

“I can say in this area in Wisconsin immigrant workers are vital to the economy. They work on dairy farms and the Christmas tree plantations, both of which are important sectors of the local economy. They work in the meat packing plant. And what a lot of people don’t understand is even though some of the immigrant workers are undocumented, they can’t tap into Social Security if they are working for employers who pay them a regular wage and withhold taxes.”

A foreign-born doctor in Wisconsin also said immigrant doctors play an important role in meeting the need for physicians in rural areas. “It does not depend on what field [immigrants] work in, its manpower they bring in,” she said. “But I feel that [immigrant] physicians are helping out a lot in rural healthcare [because] there are rural places with no access to healthcare.”

Participants in the Texas roundtables expressed similar views. A representative from an economic development organization in Houston said immigrants fill labor shortages across economic sectors in many occupations:

“We listen to several professionals around our community and with immigration everyone will agree that immigration is so impactful for us in the Woodlands, Houston, and Texas from day labor to professional jobs. We definitely depend on getting the right doctors and engineers from all over the world, who help us so much from this area. From oil to gas to chemical and manufacturing, immigration helps [fill] job need[s] for us.”

Another participant from Texas echoed this sentiment, noting that the state relies on migrants with different backgrounds to sustain its economic growth. “We need immigrants who will clean the hotel room, as well as the doctor, the engineer, philanthropists, and the [people] who create startups.”

Concerns about demographic changes emerged as one of the challenges facing communities in Wisconsin. The participants from the state said the cultural changes that accompanied the arrival of newcomers generated antipathy or wariness from certain segments of their communities. An individual who works with immigrants through his church in Wisconsin pointed out that while most accept these individuals into the community, a minority of community members explicitly voiced anti-immigrant sentiments:



“I think there’s a split. [In] Lincoln County, I know that there are people who grew up here, worked here their whole lives, and have good will to immigrants regardless of whether they’re Mexican or Asian. But then there’s a very large segment that is more vocal and not welcoming. It does create bias against Mexicans, specifically, especially if you’re talking undocumented immigrants because that’s the largest pool in this area.”

Another woman from Wisconsin observed that an individual’s unfamiliarity with a newcomers’ culture can contribute to this wariness about the way these individuals change the fabric of their communities:

“Sometimes you’re afraid of what you don’t know. The perception is that of fear and it comes from that space of the unknown. I see where the community would perceive immigrants as a threat and it comes from a space where they don’t know enough about their culture and their people. And possibly the other part [is] they don’t know how to welcome that culture or individual.”

The Wisconsin roundtable participants who were immigrants themselves said they did not always feel acceptance from their communities. An immigrant who lives in Wisconsin explained that many immigrants in her community felt the need to assimilate quickly, even though this process can vary from individual to individual:

“There is an expectation [immigrants] should assimilate in the same way, in the same amount of time—and that’s quickly. So, people don’t always understand, from my experience and what I’ve heard. People come for different reasons and that impacts their experience here. Someone who comes over as [a refugee] for example [may not] have the same experience as someone who came here willingly. The willingness to adapt is quite different.”

Some participants who were not immigrants observed similar problems from their vantage point. A community advocate from Wisconsin said her community embraces the contributions of immigrants to their economies and institutions. However, the same community expects immigrants to completely assimilate into a definition of American culture that the receiving communities define for newcomers—an imbalance that reflects fears about cultural change:

“Immigration is an overall positive thing that people embrace on the surface. We talk about things immigration can enrich, like our government, our companies, and our communities. But I can see that as a great challenge when people come here, and we have a tendency to want them to conform as opposed to bring that enrichment. It has to do with the power struggles and who is in control. When you come here, you feel like: “I want to be American but what is American,” right? You have to conform. If you don’t, you’re not American, and I think that’s where the challenge of immigration comes in. We welcome people, but we don’t give them a voice in shifting things ... there’s a lot of fear. There’s [a]political implication in [a] shift in power ... and that there’s a lot of fear instead of allowing people to bring differences that [make] us stronger culturally and economically.”

The Wisconsin participants also observed that immigrants—especially undocumented ones—are wary of engaging the broader community due to concerns about immigration enforcement. “They’re the silent group who have their own fears,” said one woman. “If they’re undocumented they’re afraid to associate with the broader community. As a community as a whole we don’t do enough engaging different cultures. That’s what I see here—we’re not doing enough.” Another participant echoed these sentiments: “A lot of undocumented immigrants are quiet. I met a woman who needed to engage law enforcement for harassment she was experiencing, and she would not do it because of fear.”

The Wisconsin roundtables also revealed municipal efforts to promote immigrant integration and diversity in cities like Madison have not completely eliminated these issues. A participant noted Madison’s government leaders have adopted initiatives to assist with the integration of newcomers and used rhetoric that welcomed them. Although these efforts can help people appreciate diversity, he said they might not alleviate the concerns community members feel about the changes immigrants bring:

“Madison is seen as a safe haven for immigrants. We’ve had leaders supportive in their rhetoric, and they beefed up capacity to do outreach to neighborhoods in Madison. Everyone loves the idea of having immigrants in their community, but the rubber hits the road when people interact with immigrants at a food cart or Mexican restaurant or say, “I saw someone speaking Spanish.” When it comes to people dealing with difference, they don’t like the idea of coming [in] close contact in situations that are uncomfortable. They love seeing the cultural heritage fair once a year and they say “That was nice. I got this charm, and it was made by immigrants.” There’s only a surface level comfort with immigrants.”

He also said the cost of living has increased in the city, leading immigrants to move to adjacent communities that possess fewer resources to service the new populations. Past BPC roundtables with local lawmakers noted similar trends. Rural county officials explained they struggled to serve new immigrants, including allocating financial resources to provide services for their children because they did not have experience receiving newcomers.²

The experience of the Texas roundtable participants differed from that of the Wisconsin residents, especially around community concerns about demographic change. For instance, only one participant in the Texas roundtable said concerns about demographic change impacted the reception of immigrants in her community. “Immigrants are crucial to revitalizing rural areas of Texas,” she said. “But it’s the most divisive political issue for so many communities. It’s challenging us on culture and race, and it’s unsettling to some people.” In contrast, many of the participants from the Houston area cited their communities’ diversity as a major selling point for businesses and workers to move to the region. “One thing the Houston region promotes is our diversity,” said one man. “We’re one of the most diverse cities and counties in the nation ... so we use that to our advantage for economic development.”

However, the Texas roundtable participants noted the state legislature has passed laws that have produced contradictory effects in the experience of immigrants in the state. One participant said the state has made it mandatory to educate all students, irrespective of their legal status, which makes it easier to integrate immigrants into communities across the state. However, the state’s passage of SB4 in 2017, which required close cooperation between local law enforcement authorities and federal immigration enforcement agencies,³ made undocumented immigrants fearful of engaging law enforcement—just like their counterparts in Wisconsin. “The number of calls related to family violence and sexual assault dropped after the 2017 SB4 legislation,” said one participant.

Part 2: Addressing the Divisive Politics Around Immigration

The roundtable participants also addressed divisions that exist around immigration in the national discourse. They observed that individuals with the strongest pro- and anti-immigrant views are often “the loudest voices” in the debate, making it difficult to have a rational discussion about the issue. They also said this problem has been compounded by the rise of partisan news channels and divisive messaging from political leaders like President Donald Trump, which reinforce absolutist worldviews. However, participants believed the country could mend these divides. In addition to having discussions about immigration at the individual and community level, they also believed U.S. political leadership should learn about immigration and promote a common message around its benefits.

A man from Wisconsin explained that the dominant voices in the national discourse frequently present immigration either as an unmitigated threat or an absolute benefit for the country. As a result, the national conversation stagnates—never getting the country closer to addressing its immigration challenges.

“I think there’s loud and unhelpful voices coming from both sides. Clearly the president ... [immigration] doesn’t have an effect ... on terrorism ... so increasing calls that immigration increases crime in the US. That’s unhelpful. On the flipside, I think there’s an overreaction when someone says they want some form of orderly immigration and there are claims of racism, nationalism, or pick some other “-ism” that has some negative connotation—and that’s not helpful. I can’t find a society that doesn’t have immigration controls. So, I think ... the loudest voices are yelling from the sides, and I think that’s not helpful because it’s become a shouting match. Extremely loud voices from the fringe from both sides. I think in many respects, the dialogue is unhelpful.”

The participants said the media landscape and messaging from political leaders reinforced the divide over immigration, strengthening the polarization around this issue. “Everything has been so politicized,” said another woman, “It’s hard to have discussion about policy about what might

work. Everyone picks [a] side on what they vote and which news broadcast they pick. And when you have a presidential candidate saying that he will build a great big wall on the southern border to keep [out] those scary brown people, there's a problem."

Participants noted that efforts to paint immigrants as a threat to the country successfully played on the fears of Americans, making it difficult to discuss the potential contributions of immigrants. "These loudest voices play on people's fears. That works for them whether there's truth or not," said a woman from Wisconsin. "Immigrant groups don't contribute to criminal activity—we know that—but it can be said on [a] national level it plays on people's fears; I get concerned about that. It seems to work." The participants said this messaging creates fear among immigrant communities in their cities. "It's a very divisive issue—those who are for immigration and those against," said a man from Texas. "There is constant messaging from those against that place fear in life for immigrants ... living in the shadows, trying to find out what's next."

Despite these challenges, the roundtable participants produced suggestions for addressing the national and local divides over immigration. Specifically, they identified several actors that needed to take a greater leadership role in helping the country move beyond these divides. Some argued that federal and local policymakers should help facilitate productive discussions around immigration. A woman from Texas said this work means explaining the country's immigration history and how the U.S. immigration system works:



“From the federal level, our leaders need [to] set the ... messages for all levels of our leadership. They have to establish that immigration is good and part of who we are, how we implement the system, how we bring people into our states and counties in the right manner. Those values have to be sent down from Washington to everywhere else. What’s missing is the leadership ... we need to get that back at the federal level and we need states and local government [to give] feedback on what they need.”

A woman from Wisconsin identified U.S. senators as the policymakers that should take part in these discussions and learn more about the immigration system. “What would be good is to have senators to be part of these discussions,” she said. “They have no idea or don’t have the sources to get information [about immigration]. I feel they are making these decisions based on hearsay knowledge.”

The participants also said local leaders and communities need to discuss the multiplicity of challenges immigration poses at the local level and convey these messages to leadership in Washington, DC. A man from Texas said:

“I do agree it has to start from the top but what we have to do ... as local communities, is to have honest conversations with ourselves and our communities to deal with systematic racism and social and health disparities. I think with what’s going on—there’s an opportunity to change that message back up to the federal level. I am hopeful there will be a loud and clear voice sustained on our own; we have to come together and have that voice in [Washington].”

Participants also highlighted the need for actors that have a stake in immigration—but have not actively sought to promote the value of immigrants—to take a stand on this issue. In particular, the participants said employers of immigrants should enter these dialogues more often to offer their perspectives on the benefits of immigration.

“I think employers that employ people who immigrate here don’t speak up enough. If they do employ undocumented workers, they put themselves in the crosshairs [but] they benefit mightily from [the] immigration system. ... They would benefit more if it was liberalized; we don’t hear from them. People would learn how helpful immigration is if they were [more ready] to speak up.”

The discussions also made clear that members of local communities have roles to play in mending these divides. “It starts at individual and community level,” said a man from Wisconsin, “And we hear anti-immigrant rhetoric [and] we need to challenge it. What makes people so reluctant to do that [is] the inability to have civil discourse of issues like that. This isn’t going to change quickly. It will be day after day and hour after hour to speak publicly.”

The roundtables also identified specific topics of discussion that could help bring the country together on immigration issues. The participants said these dialogues needed to highlight the individual experiences of immigrants, promoting greater awareness about the complexities of migrating to the United States. “We need to get individual stories, so we start seeing each other as human beings with experiences,” a woman from Wisconsin said. “That’s very different from generalizing that group of people when you know [an] individual from that group.” A woman from Texas said the discussions also needed to highlight issues around racism immigrant communities experience in the country. “If we’re not going to face the issues of race in immigration, the influential vocal minority group will override that voice if we don’t make our case for what our vision is for the nation to do away with the disparities,” she said.

The participants also suggested advocates for immigration needed to highlight how immigration serves the country’s long-term national interest. “At the end of the day one conversation we need to have is how do you make politicians understand GDP is equal to population growth,” said a man from Texas. “The fundamental problem is that most people don’t understand that if you don’t have population growth, you don’t have GDP growth. If you don’t have GDP growth, you don’t have a stock market, and the economy will be affected.” A woman from Wisconsin echoed this sentiment “There’s misunderstandings like what the true costs are in terms of immigration and how it improves the economy ... we need some facts people can sink their teeth into, and it’s important to get information out there that’s accurate.”



Part 3: Fixing a Broken Immigration System

The final theme that emerged in the roundtables revolved around the problems in the U.S. immigration system and measures that would improve its functioning. The respondents overwhelmingly said the current system is too complicated for the public—and even some experts—to fully understand, making it harder for immigrants and their sponsors to navigate. The participants proposed ideas for fixing the system that have existed in various past policy proposals. This suggests policymakers could get local support for broad reforms of the immigration system, if they make an effort to address these perceived weaknesses.

PROBLEMS WITH THE CURRENT IMMIGRATION SYSTEM

The roundtables repeatedly saw nearly all the participants lambast different parts of the U.S. immigration system, especially from those who interacted directly with it. In particular, the participants targeted the system's complexity that defied the ability of immigrants and U.S. citizens alike to understand and navigate. A man from Texas with congressional experience said immigration cases were often the most difficult part of his congressional constituent services because the requests involved dealing with a complex system:

“My experience has been working with employers to get folks to get into their companies and families to get family members into the country. Even at [the] congressional staff level, we found the immigration system to be complex with not a lot of flexibility. We handled a lot of immigration cases and no one relished it because we had to work with a complex immigration system.”

A man from Texas who has sponsored individuals through the H-1B high skilled visa program said the processes to move to the United States were expensive and cumbersome for migrants and their sponsors:

“We have a few Ph.Ds. sponsored through the H-1B program. It's very archaic and not cheap. And it's difficult for smaller

companies for process. You understand how people can be discouraged if you're paying \$5,000 to \$10,000 for a visa, a green card, naturalization. It's not as simple and straightforward; it takes years and thousands of dollars to go through."

A man from Wisconsin echoed these observations, noting that individuals who say immigrants must "get in line" to enter the country legally, do not understand the costs and struggles to sponsor non-citizens to arrive to the United States:

"If anybody has worked with anyone trying to navigate that system, they see how much of a hassle and [how] expensive it is. I read comments like "Well, I'm all for legal immigration—and people need to get at the end of the line." There isn't a line! It's just telling them they can't come in and being in favor of the law. I think of the resources for the system and how they can be directed [to make] our immigration system better. It needs comprehensive immigration reform."

The participants also noted that the immigration system made it extremely hard for employers across a range of sectors to recruit qualified non-citizen workers. A man from Texas who works in healthcare said that he struggled to get health care workers for his hospitals because of the immigration fees and other costs:



“I’ve recruited many physicians and nurses over the years. I can tell you, it’s an extremely difficult and costly process. I sympathize with those individuals who have gone through it. It costs us a lot of money to recruit a doctor or nurse from foreign countries. We needed to hire lawyers and pay exorbitant fees to get them in the country to serve the community. It’s not easy.”

A man from Wisconsin said that the lack of opportunities for lower skilled workers in the meat processing and dairy industry makes it hard for his community to get the workers they need:

“The rules are stacked against the kind of workers we need in this area, such as the low skilled workers in the farms and meat packing plants. There’s no path for them to come here legally—it’s virtually impossible. When you talk to people who are anti-immigrant and you explain [that] to them, they won’t accept it. They say, “When my grandfather came here ...” and I explain to them that you had to buy a ticket and you arrived in New York and you were accepted. There were few restrictive rules. This is a modern phenomenon. The system is in bad need of reform.”

The participants also explained that the outdated system made it difficult to retain the immigrants needed for the U.S. workforce, especially those on an H-1B high skilled visa or foreign graduates of American universities. A woman from Wisconsin said policy changes to the H-1B program has made it more difficult for these individuals to remain in the United States:



“I think we have some systems for talent attraction and retention, but those are spaces becoming more and more complicated for folks who are living here on a H-1B. ... The spaces where we used to have more flexibility have closed up in many ways. It’s one of those places that’s so hard to have narrative discussion when it’s so difficult to explain policy and there’s always been this conversation “get in line.” There is no line—that’s not something that can happen anymore.”

A man from Texas who works in the energy and chemical fields also said the Optional Practical Training program, which allows foreign students to work in the United States after completing their studies for up to two years, fills job openings in his field.⁴ However, the program’s temporary nature makes it difficult for employers to retain them.^b “I work closely with Texas A&M, and I see a stack of resumes in their career center and 60% will be foreign born. We talk about [Optional Practical Training] which seems to be [a] gateway to stay,” he said, “And you’re spending two years with them but they may have to go home.”

The multiplicity of problems hindering the immigration system led the participants to conclude the immigration system does not contribute to the United States. “I don’t think the immigration process is serving our country, I think it’s doing the opposite,” said a man from Wisconsin. “We were the once place of refuge, and I think we have made people who are here trying to go through the process feel very unwelcome and those outside of the country having less and less of a desire to come here because of this process.” A woman from Texas was more blunt: “In order to say something was broken, it has to have worked. And I don’t think we’ve had a system that’s actually worked for us.”

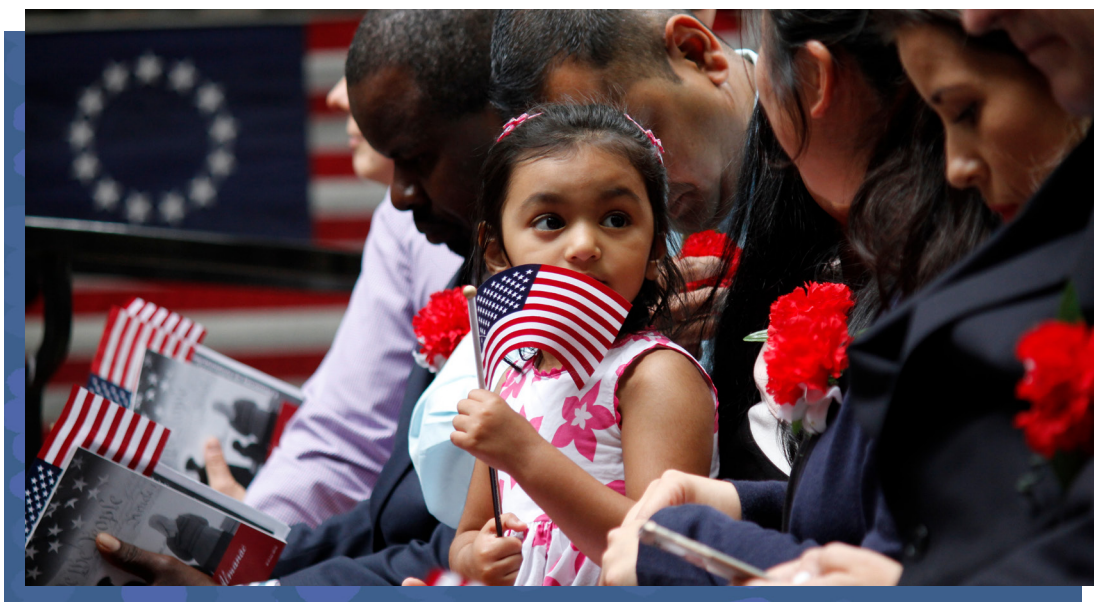
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- b Although students in the program can adjust their status to an H-1B or green card, employers who sponsor them must go through an entirely separate application process even though they already employ the student. In contrast, countries such as Canada provide more opportunities for foreign graduates of Canadian universities to apply for permanent residency after participating in the Post-Graduation Work Permit Program, which allows them to work in the country for two years. [1] Sadikshya Nepal, “The Challenging Transition from an International Student Visa to an H-1B: A Primer,” Bipartisan Policy Center, July 15, 2020. Available at: <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/blog/the-challenging-transition-from-an-international-student-visa-to-an-h-1b-a-primer/>. [2] Government of Canada, “Post-Graduation Work Permit Program (PGWPP),” February 21, 2020. Available at: <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/operational-bulletins-manuals/temporary-residents/study-permits/post-graduation-work-permit-program.html>. [3] Cristobal Ramón, Works in Progress: Assessing Employment-Based Temporary-to-Permanent Immigration Systems in Europe and North America, Bipartisan Policy Center, March 25, 2020. Available at: <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/works-in-progress/>.

IDEAS FOR IMMIGRATION: REFORMING A BROKEN SYSTEM

Although roundtable participants believed the immigration system is broken, they did make suggestions for fixing the system—including several ideas that experts and legislators have previously proposed. The participants said a reformed immigration system needed to find the right balance between employment- and family-based immigration. A woman from Wisconsin said:

“I think it’s really important to go back to [the] purpose of our immigration policy. It’s not mutually exclusive. We have visas to come to work; I think that’s important. But when it comes to reuniting families, it’s important to keep those human factors. The challenge is finding the balance between the human and economic factors. The system right now is so confusing, it’s so disheartening for families and individuals that it becomes an arduous process.”

Another participant from the same session highlighted the need for a new system to continue making humanitarian migration an important part of a new immigration system, especially as other countries such as Germany have emerged as leaders in this area:



“I do think that humanitarian instincts need to be an important [part] of this reform. I was thinking about the Syrian civil war and the massive number of people who left Syria to go to Eastern and Western Europe and how Germany stepped up to absorb so many of them. It’s sad we need to keep thinking about it. But it’s really [an] obligation from the developed world when you have a situation like Syria that the doors are open. The humanitarian element does need to be a priority.”

A woman from Texas also noted that a new immigration system needed to ensure foreign students who complete their studies in the United States could remain a permanent part of the workforce. “You need rules and regulations based on the concept of getting and keeping these students and not pushing them back when they get a degree,” she said.

The participants also called for creating a dynamic system that adjusts to changes in the labor market and employer demand for workers, rather than establishing set numbers for migration levels. A participant in Wisconsin pointed out that domestically we hire workers based on economic conditions, which stands in stark contrast to an immigration system that has not changed in decades. He said:

“I think it should be [a] more dynamic process. We don’t determine how many police officers [we have] based on laws passed 20 years ago. They adjust it based on sentencing and correction laws on a yearly basis. It doesn’t make sense for Silicon Valley, which is desperate for talent, to be handcuffed to a number set in 1990. It may be arbitrary, but we should adjust for other things on a more flexible schedule. If [the Department of Labor] says we have an extreme demand in these sectors, that’s an example of how we should tailor these things instead of getting Congress to up the numbers to 110%. I think that’s certainly preferable, given how obvious and difficult [it is] to pass immigration laws.”

Another participant said the United States should imitate countries, such as Canada, that prioritize certain skill sets based on the economic conditions in the country. “I’m torn why [we] don’t have a system based on economics and why [we] don’t prioritize the labor needs in agriculture and the high-tech sector. Canada has a system that favors certain skills.”

The roundtables participants also wanted a new immigration system to have a broader definition of “merit” when assessing whether an individual can come to the United States to work. Although the term merit implies selecting high skilled workers, a man from Texas said a new system should assess demand in low-to-mid-skilled industries like construction:

“The need for the job or position is based on merit. It’s not just Ph.D. scientists; it can even be laborers. You go to any construction project and 99.9% are foreign born ... you need legal foreign-born workers for construction since they’re vitally important. There should be an opportunity even without [formal] education.”

A woman from Wisconsin called for a holistic assessment of an individual’s background when determining whether to admit them to the United States or not. However, she said this process should also determine if the United States is the right match for them and their skills:

“How do we, every step the way of immigration, think of the person first? In idealistic work, you would be treated as a human: “What is my vision for being here? What is my mission? What are the things I will contribute to this country? What would this country be able to offer me?” That’s what I ask [to be the] intention for this. It would be a two-way interview, and they would be interviewing us.”

These comments align with BPC’s own past polling that showed Americans did not define merit based only on an individual’s skill set and education. Instead, they said a merit-based system should select individuals based on personal characteristics and values such as working hard, learning English, and following the country’s laws.⁵

In addition to establishing broad goals and principles for a new immigration system, the participants also raised ideas that directly mirror policies that exist in other countries and/or have been proposed by U.S. lawmakers. First, some of the participants expressed interest in having states play an active role in selecting immigrants who meet the labor demands in their local economies—a system that exists in countries such as Canada and that has inspired U.S. legislators and think tanks to propose similar ideas for the United States.⁶ A woman in Wisconsin recommended:

“[T]he way our policies should work [is] based on state requirements. [T]he state should set a number system and the needs are rural healthcare; these two are top contenders, and we welcome these people and every state should have its own numeric system and generate its needs for immigrants. You look at economic progress; you’re looking at jobs not taken from this community.”

However, some of the Texas participants wanted the federal government to continue taking the lead on managing the migration system to prevent states from pursuing policies that could inadvertently drive more migration to their communities. As one speaker said, “It should be driven by federal government so there’s not population overgrowth in one state because if you have one state be more immigrant friendly, the immigrants will overwhelm the state, the city, the school districts, and every other public resource.”

The participants also made suggestions for introducing new temporary programs or expanding existing ones for migrant workers. They proposed ideas that could expand the scope of the existing H-2A temporary agricultural visa and H-2B temporary non-agricultural visa programs. A man from Wisconsin said more temporary programs for lower skilled occupations could provide incentives for undocumented immigrants to enter the country legally:

“One thing that ought to be done—there should be some middle ground between permanent resident status and being undocumented. I think there has to be a way for people to come here to work and be legal without the expectations that they’re going to become citizens or become permanent residents. I think a lot of people come here to work and send money back. I would like to see low skilled workers have some limited visa so they can work or earn a living and be documented to the extent monitored ... that would give them a way to be here legally, pay their taxes, social services, and healthcare. I see great benefit in that.”



Another participant from Texas floated a proposal that mirrored temporary-to-permanent systems in European countries, such as Germany where non-citizens can access permanent status after living in these countries for a specific number of years.⁷ He said, “Whoever wants to come legally, give them a period of one year to prove to the government that they can establish themselves in the U.S., stay with clear criminal histories, and show they are productive and engaged in the community.”

Finally, most of the participants believed undocumented immigrants should complete a criminal background check and pay a fine to earn legal status—a position that aligns with BPC polling on this issue.^c A man from Wisconsin said the process could operate more like the criminal justice system that allows some individuals a path towards redeeming themselves in the eyes of the law:

“As a framing device it’s more useful as “setting it right.” We let people out of prison and give them a path towards redemption, even if you don’t think they’re redeemed. Overly harsh fines wouldn’t help but certain things would be useful ... someone who has ten violent robberies is someone we don’t want to keep. So, we need criminal background checks, a probationary period where people demonstrate good moral character, and paying for the process. Let’s start from a clean slate.”

A Texas man from a law enforcement background agreed, noting that the criminal background check would be an important part of the process of granting legal status:

“I think the people who are arriving to the country, being productive, and making an honest living or making an effort should be rewarded and facilitated with a legal status. Based on our department, I do agree that people who are committing violent crimes should be removed. We’re a welcoming city, but the mayor and chief don’t want people committing violent crime if they’re undocumented. But people who are making an honest living—which is the majority—they should be rewarded and get documented.”

c A 2018 BPC poll found that 44% of the 1,004 respondents support a path to citizenship if individuals pass a background check, pay “their fair share of taxes,” and pay a monetary penalty. Bipartisan Policy Center, “The New Middle on Immigration,” July 17, 2018. Available at: <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/survey-results-the-new-middle-on-immigration/>.

Another man from Texas echoed these recommendations, noting that the alternative of deporting all undocumented immigrants is simply unrealistic given the size of the population in the United States:

“There needs to be a process where someone undocumented can transition to a legal status. They’re already paying federal taxes and contributing to [the] economy, but there has to be a path forward. If you want gun control, good luck—there’s 100 billion guns registered. It’s the same issue with immigration. If you don’t want to have a legal pathway for undocumented how will you deport that number of people? It’s not realistic.”

Despite the consensus, some of the participants were worried that high fines for gaining access to legal status would deter some undocumented immigrants from participating in the process if they could not afford the fee. “Hundred-dollar or five-hundred-dollar fines, that’s going to be beyond means for most people to pay. It’s uncollectible. We’re not going to devote those resources to collect those fines because they will sit on the books,” said one man from Wisconsin.

Finally, some participants said the government should assess demand for skills in certain industries when determining how to grant legal status to undocumented individuals. “I think they should be able to apply for a visa to stay here until a decision is made,” said a man from Wisconsin. “If you’re working in a meat-packing plant and you’ve been here five years undocumented, the visa should be freely granted because there’s a need for your skill.” However, one participant pointed out that the country’s leaders also needed to reform the legal immigration system that creates incentives for people to migrate through legal channels. “Moving forward, we need to take [care] of the undocumented population, but you want to encourage people to go through legal paths that are more streamlined,” said a man from Texas.

Conclusion

Despite the geographic, economic, and demographic differences between Texas and Wisconsin, the roundtables showed that Americans representing different organizations and civil society sectors largely agree on the problems and solutions to the United States' immigration impasse. Rather than viewing the debate through distinctly partisan lenses, the participants held much more pragmatic viewpoints and showed that fixing the divides over an outdated immigration system involves incorporating ideas that reflect common sense and benefits immigrants and the communities they live in.

The fact that individuals from diverse backgrounds—most of whom did not know each other—were willing to join these discussions, participate civilly, and discuss actual policies and solutions proves Americans can move beyond polarizing slogans on important issues when given a venue and a voice. More importantly, the roundtables showed that Americans want their leaders in Washington to mend the political divides and reform a broken immigration system, in consultation with local leaders and grassroots efforts. These roundtables clearly demonstrate Americans want lawmakers to work together to move the country forward in turning its immigration challenges into opportunities.



Endnotes

- 1 [1] Bipartisan Policy Center, “The New Middle on Immigration,” July 17, 2018. Available at: <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/survey-results-the-new-middle-on-immigration/>.
- [2] Bipartisan Policy Center, “Morning Consult/BPC Survey Finds Room for Compromise on Immigration; Border Wall a Barrier to Negotiation,” September 25, 2019. Available at: <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/blog/immigration-poll/>.
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- 6 Michele Waslin, Immigration at the State Level: An Examination of Proposed State-Based Visa Programs in the U.S., Bipartisan Policy Center, May 28, 2020. Available at: <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/immigration-at-the-state-level-an-examination-of-proposed-state-based-visa-programs-in-the-u-s/>.
- 7 Cristobal Ramón, Works in Progress: Assessing Employment-Based Temporary-to-Permanent Immigration Systems in Europe and North America, Bipartisan Policy Center, March 25, 2020. Available at: <https://bipartisanpolicy.org/report/works-in-progress/>.

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