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Immigration Reform Is Still Key To Progress In STEM Fields

By Stuart Anderson

Majority Leader Eric Cantor's (R-VA) primary defeat has some calling for an end to immigration reform, arguing his opponent ran in part against "amnesty." But immigration is not just about the most controversial aspect of reform. Congress also is in charge of America's policies to attract and retain highly skilled immigrants. While the two issues have been tied together politically, since it has been unlikely reforms to increase the number of H-1B visas and employment-based green cards would become law without accompanying measures on legalization and border security, the positive impact of highly skilled immigrants in America has never been greater.

Historically immigrants have always made important contributions to the country. A recent **National Foundation for American Policy** (NFAP) study shows immigrants are playing an increasingly important role in contributing to science and engineering advancements in America, as demonstrated by their awards, research, entrepreneurship and education. Objective measures indicate those contributions have increased significantly since the 1960s, when major restrictions on immigration were lifted, and, in particular, over the past 20 years, as immigrants have found important niches in science and technology fields.

The NFAP research illustrates that the right laws can play an important part in whether a country benefits from increased globalization, particularly rising educational achievement in India, China, and elsewhere. The passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which eliminated the discriminatory national origin quotas and opened the door to Asian immigrants, and the Immigration Act of 1990, which increased employment-based green card numbers, were key factors in enhancing the ability of America to assimilate talented individuals from around the world into our culture and economy.

While some of the rise in indicators like immigrant Nobel Prize winners reflects an overall increase in the reputation and capability of American institutions and researchers post-1960, a greater openness to immigration helped make the United States the leading global destination for research in many different science and technology fields, including computers, cancer research and many others.

Since 2000, immigrants have been awarded 24 of the 68 Nobel Prizes won by Americans in Chemistry, Medicine and Physics. Between 1960 and 2013, immigrants won 72 Nobel Prizes in

Chemistry, Medicine and Physics, a significant increase over the 25 prizes awarded to immigrants in about the same number of years prior to 1960.

Workforce statistics illustrate the increased role of foreign-born scientists and engineers. The percentage of foreign-born individuals with Ph.D.s working in science and engineering in the United States rose from 23 percent in 1993 to 42 percent in 2010, a near doubling in less than 20 years.

Many of today's immigrant cancer researchers come from countries that effectively would have been barred from immigrating under U.S. law prior to 1965, including China, India, and South Korea. At the top 7 cancer research centers, 42 percent of the researchers are foreign-born, including 62 percent at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center.

The importance of immigrant entrepreneurs to American innovation and the U.S. economy has also increased dramatically over the past 40 years. Prior to 1980, only 8 U.S. publicly-traded companies funded with venture capital (or 7 percent) had an immigrant founder or co-founder, according to the National Venture Capital Association. But between 2006 and 2012, 92 companies with venture backing that became publicly traded (or 33 percent) had at least one immigrant founder, including such companies as LinkedIn and Tesla Motors.

These trends could increase. In 2011, foreign nationals accounted for 71 percent of the full-time graduate students in electrical engineering at U.S. universities, compared to 44 percent in 1982. The statistics are similar in computer science. Foreign graduate students are crucial in assisting in research that attracts top faculty and strengthens the academic programs at U.S. schools, which benefits U.S. students and ensures America retains its preeminence as a teaching center in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields.

With the right policies America has a great capacity to attract talent from around the world. The country benefits from that talent. Only politics stands in the way.

Stuart Anderson served as executive associate commissioner for policy and counselor to the commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service from August 2001 to January 2003 and is executive director of the National Foundation for American Policy, a nonpartisan research group based in Arlington, VA.

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