

National Foundation for American Policy

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New Research: Immigrants Have Been Awarded Nearly 40% of U.S.-Won Nobel Prizes in Chemistry, Medicine and Physics Since the Year 2000

Arlington, Va. – Immigrants have been awarded 39 percent, or 33 of 85, of the Nobel Prizes won by Americans in Chemistry, Medicine and Physics since 2000. In 2017, the sole American winner of the Nobel Prize in Chemistry was an immigrant, Joachim Frank, a Columbia University professor born in Germany. Immigrant Reiner Weiss, who was born in Germany and came to the United States as a teenager, was awarded the 2017 Nobel Prize in Physics, sharing it with two other Americans, Kip S. Thorne and Barry C. Barish. In 2016, all 6 American winners of the Nobel Prize in economics and scientific fields were immigrants.

These achievements by immigrants point to the gains to America of welcoming talent from across the globe. It does not mean America should welcome only Nobel Prize winners. Such a policy would be impossible to implement, since most immigrant Nobel Prize winners enter the United States many years before being awarded this honor. Most people immigrate to another country in their 20s, particularly employment-based immigrants, who either study in America or come here to work shortly after obtaining a degree abroad. The average of age of Nobel Prize winners at the time of the award is 59.5 years, according to economist Mark J. Perry.

The report, “Immigrants and Nobel Prizes: 1901-2017,” is available at www.nfap.com

Table 1
Immigrant Nobel Prize Winners in Chemistry, Medicine and Physics Since 2000

Immigrant Nobel Winners Since 2000	33 of 85 American winners have been immigrants
Percentage of Immigrant Winners Since 2000	39%

Source: Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, National Foundation for American Policy, George Mason University Institute for Immigration Research. Numbers and percentage for chemistry, medicine and physics prizes.

“The research shows that to reap the most benefits of scientific and technological innovation, America must remain open to immigration,” said NFAP Executive Director Stuart Anderson, former head of policy at the Immigration and Naturalization Service under President George W. Bush. “The achievements of so many immigrants as seen in the form of Nobel Prizes, successful businesses, and contributions in sports, the arts and many other fields are a testament to the American Dream.”

Nobel Prize winners represent great individual achievement but also reflect the state of research, openness and scientific advancement within a society. American students, research colleagues and the U.S. economy gain from the work performed by outstanding scientists and researchers, including Nobel Prize winners.

The right immigration laws matter, particularly in determining whether the United States gains from increased globalization and rising educational achievement in India, China and elsewhere. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 eliminated the discriminatory national origin quotas and opened the door to Asian immigrants, while the Immigration Act of 1990 increased employment-based green card numbers. Those two pieces of legislation have been important factors in drawing international students to the country and enhancing the ability of America to assimilate talented individuals into our culture and economy. While the rise in 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 has helped make the United States the leading global destination for research in many different science and technology fields, including computers, cancer research and others.

Sir J. Fraser Stoddart, winner of the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 2016 and an immigrant from the United Kingdom, noted that “his research group at Northwestern University has students and scientists from a dozen different countries.” Stoddart believes scientific research will remain strong in America “as long as we don’t enter an era where we turn our back on immigration.”

Among the key findings in this report:

- One can see the increasing influence and importance of immigrants on science in America over the past half century. Between 1901 and 1959, immigrants won 25 Nobel Prizes in Chemistry, Medicine and Physics but won 81 prizes in these fields – *more than three times as many* – between 1960 and 2017.¹
- Between 1901 and 1959, only one immigrant to the United States (William Francis Giauque) won the Nobel Prize in Chemistry, while between 1960 and 2017, 26 immigrants won the Nobel Prize for Chemistry.
- From 1901 to 1959, 9 immigrants to the United States won the Nobel Prize for Medicine, but 29 immigrants were awarded the Nobel Prize for Medicine from 1960 to 2017.
- In Physics, 15 immigrants won the Nobel Prize from 1901 to 1959, while 26 immigrants won the Nobel Prize for Physics between 1960 and 2017.

The report notes that when one asks successful entrepreneurs and scientists conducting groundbreaking research whether they favor liberalized policies on immigration, the answer they usually give is that more immigration and greater openness to international students, researchers and immigrants across the skill spectrum will help America grow and prosper. Policymakers would be wise to listen to them.

¹ The numbers and other information in the report have been updated and adapted from *Immigrants and Nobel Prizes*, NFAP Policy Brief, National Foundation for American Policy, October 2016. For more background on Nobel Prize winners see <https://www.nobelprize.org/>.

About the National Foundation for American Policy

Established in the Fall 2003, the National Foundation for American Policy (NFAP) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, non-partisan public policy research organization based in Arlington, Virginia focusing on trade, immigration and related issues. The Advisory Board members include Columbia University economist Jagdish Bhagwati, Ohio University economist Richard Vedder, former U.S. Senator and Energy Secretary Spencer Abraham and other prominent individuals. Over the past 24 months, NFAP's research has been written about in the *Wall Street Journal*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and other major media outlets. The organization's reports can be found at www.nfap.com.

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