Compromise is Possible on Immigration Reform

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In a time of hyper-polarized politics, is a reasonable compromise on immigration policy possible? While the rancorous and unproductive Congressional debates of recent years point toward pessimism, the report of the bipartisan Immigration Policy Roundtable convened by the Brookings Institution and Duke University’s Kenan Institute for Ethics suggests a more hopeful view.

The roundtable’s members saw immigration from divergent, often conflicting, perspectives. In fact, the range of political and ideological views we represented is unprecedented in recent immigration policy panels. Some of us were clearly attuned to the opportunities and realities of an increasingly interconnected global economy, which necessarily involves substantial movements of workers and their dependents around the world. Others of us were just as clearly concerned with the domestic costs and strains. Some empathized with Americans who are outraged that immigration laws are not enforced. Others held that our current immigration laws are unworkable and must be reconciled with social and economic realities.

During our deliberations, we came to recognize that we would never resolve our principled disagreements. Nonetheless, progress at the policy level turned out to be possible, and the results fruitful.

Despite our deep divisions, participants ultimately converged on a set of recommendations that would significantly enhance enforcement of our immigration laws at the workplace and set standards for the legalization of illegal immigrants. We also agreed on holding constant, at least for the present, the overall number of permanent legal residents admitted annually while adjusting the mix toward fewer family-sponsored and more employment-based admissions. And while insisting on the centrality of the nuclear family, we endorsed measures to reduce the daunting backlog of visa applicants. We also agreed on improvements in temporary worker programs and on efforts to assimilate and integrate immigrants into American society. And we recommended long-term measures to improve management of immigration by establishing an independent standing commission on these matters and engaging the Mexican government on a broad range of issues that affect cross-border population flows.

In a policy arena marked by mistrust on all sides, members of the roundtable came to see that it was vital to build trust by focusing on linked confidence-building measures. To this end, we recommended a carefully coordinated sequence in which employees, employers, immigrant advocates and enforcement proponents would be induced to share the same goals: to establish and certify a workplace verification system; to build the infrastructure to support an efficient,
effective, and certifiable legalization program; and to make sure that both proceed as quickly as possible.

Our recommendation that Congress create an independent Standing Commission on Immigration was designed to extend this trust-building process into the future. For example, while the system of temporary work visas that has grown up alongside the permanent admissions categories has proved quite flexible, especially in response to employer demands, it lacks adequate public scrutiny and worker protections. Our proposed Standing Commission on Immigration would provide a forum where the national interest could be explored and debated, not just the needs of specific economic sectors.

The members of the roundtable understand that elected public officials labor under pressures that we did not. Nonetheless, we believe that our recommendations offer a blueprint for progress on one of the most divisive issues our country faces. Members of Congress from both parties must soon decide whether they want to address the issue seriously, or just continue to score political points while problems fester and public mistrust grows.