



High-Skilled Immigration: Separating Myth from Reality

The United States' high-skilled immigration system is flat-out failing to live up to its potential. Our system is too small, too bureaucratic, and not effective in attracting and retaining the highest achievers. One cause of these failures is a set of persistent myths about both the economics of high-skilled immigration and how policy actually works in practice.

Myths about the economic impact of high-skilled immigration lead its critics — and even many of its supporters — to underestimate its impacts on innovation, entrepreneurship, and local economic growth. As a result, we are left with immigration policy that aims in effect to keep the economy stuck in the past, propping up inequality and hampering startup growth.

In our report, [Exceptional by Design: How to Fix High-Skilled Immigration to Maximize American Interests](#), we tackle the following myths and offer a better way to understand how high-skilled immigration reform can be harnessed to create better opportunities for American workers and communities. (You can click on each myth to view the longer discussion of it in the original report.)

[Myth 1: The United States cannot handle significantly higher annual rates of high-skilled immigration.](#)

Reality: Both historical precedent and the modern experiences of other developed countries suggest that the American economy can handle substantially more immigration than it currently takes in — particularly more highly-skilled workers, researchers, and entrepreneurs. Places in the U.S. with the most high-skilled immigrants have higher median incomes, higher rates of labor force participation, and are more supportive of further increasing high-skilled immigration.

[Myth 2: High-skilled immigrants take jobs that someone else would have taken.](#)

Reality: There is no fixed number of jobs in the economy. Instead, demand for more workers grows with population, new business formation, and capital investment — all of which are boosted by high-skilled immigration.

[Myth 3: The best way to maximize the benefits of high-skilled immigration for natives is to tightly regulate immigrants' pay, occupation, and job choice.](#)

Reality: Admitting the highest-skilled immigrants and forcing employers to compete for them maximizes benefits for the native-born and protects immigrants better than micro-regulation and bureaucracy. The American economy's enduring strength comes largely from its dynamism, its ability to change and adapt over time. Rules that aim to freeze today's labor market are self-defeating.

Myth 4: We can quickly identify labor market shortages and address them with tailored high-skilled immigration policy.

Reality: With rare exceptions, labor market shortages are ill-defined, impossible to measure, and a poor proxy for which types of immigration would be most beneficial to American workers and the economy.

Myth 5: We should staple green cards to international students' college diplomas.

Reality: Experience suggests linking degrees with long-term visas will incentivize the growth of “degree mills.” Wages should be at the center of our skilled immigration system, not easy-to-game credentials.

Myth 6: Merit-based immigration requires a points-based high-skilled immigration system.

Reality: The best proxy for a visa applicant's expected long-run economic contributions is pay, with only modest adjustments for other factors. International experience suggests immigration pathways based on employment rather than arbitrary “points” leads to better employment matches.

Myth 7: High-skilled immigration policy should aim to admit skilled workers who are complements to the existing labor force.

Reality: Identifying workers who are pure complements is impossible in practice.

Myth 8: Temporary work visas are unnecessary and exploitative. They should be replaced by green cards.

Reality: Temporary work visas can play an important role in the high-skilled immigration system. Flawed programs like the H-1B limit job-to-job mobility and occupational choice, but such restrictions can be changed to make temporary visa holders full participants in the labor market. Further, the earnings histories of temporary visa holders — demonstrated experience in U.S. labor markets — can help policy prioritize green card applicants.

Myth 9: Expanding high-skilled immigration is politically risky.

Reality: An overwhelming majority of voters — 78 percent overall — support increasing high-skilled immigration. Among Trump voters, support is 71 percent. As polarized as the country may seem about illegal immigration and the border, the strong bipartisan consensus in favor of high-skilled immigration remains as strong as ever.