

Two images come to mind when thinking about immigration these days. The first shows the happy faces during and just after a naturalization ceremony, the fulfillment of the dreams of immigrants who worked toward becoming U.S. citizens. They wave tiny American flags, give hugs, and generally exude the joy and satisfaction of achieving a long-sought goal.

The second one is more jarring: Border Patrol officers, mounted on horseback, hounding Haitian migrants who gathered at the U.S.-Mexico border in Texas. The common thread is one in which people come to the U.S. in hopes of a better life. But the ways they got here, their specific circumstances and eventual outcomes couldn't be more different. Underlying all of this is one central fact: In this city, this state and the U.S., we need immigrants. Badly. A growing population is needed to prod economic growth. Population growth is fueled in one of two ways, and one of those sources isn't pulling its weight. Birth rates in the U.S. have been below "replacement" levels — those in which the number of children born matches or exceeds that of those who die — for some time. It's generally accepted that the magic number is 2.1 children for every woman of child-bearing age. The U.S. has consistently fallen short of that number for years and currently stands at just over 1.6, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Oklahoma's is higher, but not by much: 1.86 in 2019 and steadily declining. Other pressures continue to force U.S. population figures down: The Baby Boomer generation is growing older, with accelerating mortality rates that come naturally with age. And the COVID-19 pandemic is putting the brakes on population growth. Since early 2020, close to 700,000 Americans have died from the disease. Growing economies need workers, and we have fewer of them relative to the size of the country. Increased retirements and those not going back to work because of the pandemic (many workers are staying home to deal with their kids' remote learning needs, for example) are doing a number on the job market. By the end of September, Oklahoma's unemployment claims were at prepandemic levels, and many employers

complain that they cannot find people to fill openings. And lest we forget, workers are the ones funding popular programs like Social Security and Medicare. A shrinking workforce is a serious problem for those programs. This is where immigration traditionally comes in to save the day. Be it tech workers coming from overseas or farm laborers arriving overland from Latin America, the infusion of new workers via immigration has been a consistent competitive advantage for the U.S. You can see the effects of immigration locally. Tulsa lost population between 2001 and 2010, census data show. But in the following decade, Tulsa's population growth doubled estimates, surging by more than 21,000 people. In the same time, growth in the Tulsa area's Hispanic population increased by about 17,000 people. Some of that came through births, but birth rates for Hispanics are trending the same way they are for other demographics, falling 3% in 2020, according to the CDC. That points toward attributing the local Hispanic community's growth to new U.S. residents. Without that driver of growth, Tulsa's population would have been relatively stagnant. So how do we get more stories like the happily naturalized new Americans and fewer desperate scenes at the U.S.-Mexico border? People come here any way they can and do so with whatever resources they have. For folks heading to our border, those resources are scant and the barriers are substantial. The way our immigration system is configured, it's biased toward people of means, with advanced educations and specific countries of origin. Got a relative already living here? A big plus. So is having an employer ready and waiting for you. Lacking any of those advantages, good luck. Especially if you come from Mexico or somewhere in the Middle East. And while the official fees for immigration aren't exorbitant, the real costs can be heavy. Legal fees and a yearslong, detail-oriented process raise those barriers even higher. That makes the temptation to enter the country illegally and work in the shadow economy that much greater. It's clear the problem isn't getting better. Constricting immigration hurts our long-term interests, but migrants flocking to the border by the thousands is an untenable reality that is

equally undesirable. So far, the people who could do something about it â€” members of Congress â€” simply havenâ€™t. Plenty have done their fair share of grandstanding at the border. But in actual action to fix a broken immigration system, political leaders have instead allowed the problem to fester while taking potshots at their rivals. A streamlined immigration system is needed that balances proper vetting with the economic needs of employers. A wide swath of workers is needed now, and not just engineers, coding experts, physicians and whatnot. We need people in agriculture, construction, service industries and health care, too, all valuable and necessary fields for the U.S. economy. And we need taxpayers. Being a superpower doesnâ€™t come cheap. The only way to maintain our place on the world stage is to have more people shouldering the financial burden that comes with being the global top dog. The same is also true of all those beloved entitlement programs â€” Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid â€” that are sacrosanct and endangered. Real immigration reform hasnâ€™t happened in decades, and itâ€™s easy to see why: Itâ€™s hard. The issue is further complicated by post-9/11 anxieties, increased nativism and a craving for short-term political wins rather than long-term policy success. Add to that the hyper-polarized nature of Congress, and you can see how monumental the task is. But thatâ€™s the job. Lawmakers are plopped into prestigious positions by voters to figure out how to run this very complicated engine of state. If the gig is too big for you, there are other employment opportunities outside of public office. Itâ€™s also an opportunity. There is something to be said for helping set the nation on a course that is more stable, dynamic and sustainable. We can debate for days all the ways to accomplish those goals, but itâ€™s key to remember that immigration has long been a source of innovation, growth and energy in the U.S. Fostering that will keep things moving forward. Drop the ball at your own peril.

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