

VISA LOTTERY RACIST, ITS OPPONENTS SAY; BUT IT SURVIVES CALLS FOR IMMIGRATION REFORM

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Body

It's time to play visa lotto again. Time to give 55,000 people with no direct family ties to the United States or desperately needed job skills visas to live in the United States legally.

But the players may come only from certain nations, and not the big emigrant countries such as Canada, the Dominican Republic, Britain, Haiti, Jamaica or Mexico.

Legislators call the visa lottery, which in the past has disproportionately benefited immigrant hopefuls from Ireland and Poland, the "diversity immigrant visa program." Opponents call the lottery racist, for its past emphasis on Caucasian immigrants.

The deadline to apply this year is March 12.

Some Caribbean and Latin American refugee advocates, in unusual agreement with groups seeking to limit U.S. immigration, wonder how the visa lottery has survived when polls show eight of every 10 Americans think immigration rates should be dramatically scaled back.

"It deserves to be among the first possible cuts in any reform of immigration," said Arthur Helton, who championed the rights of South Florida-bound Cuban and Haitian boat people in the early 1990s.

The visa lottery flies in the face of the United States' two main immigration goals for the last decade - allowing in close family members of American citizens and people with specialized job skills - Helton said. He directs migration programs at the Open Society Institute in New York.

The lottery was created as a reaction to the 1986 immigration reform act. The act, by emphasizing family unification and specialized job skills, had closed off the immigration option to many European nations that had sent large numbers of people to United States for centuries.

There have been several attempts to end the visa lottery.

Last year Congress eliminated the provision reserving 16,000 of the 55,000 annual spots for Irish citizens and opened the program to Africans.

Earlier this year, the U.S. bipartisan commission on immigration recommended that the lottery be ended. So did the author of a pending bill on immigration, Rep. Lamar Smith, R-Texas. So did Doris Meissner, the commissioner of the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Even the nation's biggest Hispanic lobbying group, the National Council of La Raza, would not back the lottery.

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"There is widespread support, including from the administration, for elimination of . . . the diversity program," Meissner **said** at a congressional hearing in September.

That is not the view of Rep. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., whose constituency includes neighborhoods replenished by new Irish and Polish families. Schumer has amended the **immigration** bill to preserve 27,000 slots each year for a **lottery**.

He argues that 27,000 is a small fraction of the 750,000 people immigrating legally to the United States each year.

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