

Limit relatives' rights

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Body

Who and how many do we want to let in? This is the question forced on us by the current debate over how to fix our convoluted family immigration system.

Unfortunately, the answer the Senate has come up with is the wrong one. The law today gives special immigration **rights** not only to nuclear family members of citizens and immigrants here as legal residents, but also to a wider array of **relatives** -- from adult sons and daughters of citizens and legal residents, to adult brothers and sisters of citizens. A complicated system of numerical caps results in huge waiting lists, with as many as 8million people in line for legal immigration and very long waits ahead of them.

But managing the enormous demand for immigration through waiting lists is no way to run a railroad. The insight more than a decade ago from the Commission on Immigration Reform, chaired by former congresswoman Barbara Jordan, still holds true: "Credible immigration policy should not give false hopes to applicants." In other words, decide what categories of people to admit, then each year let in everyone who qualifies.

This has to mean either enormous increases in family immigration or a more narrow definition of which **relatives** get to come. The Senate measure pretends to do the second, but it really does the first. As part of the trade-off for amnesty for the illegal population, it promises to eliminate the extended family categories, but only after admitting most of the millions already on the waiting lists. This process would take eight or 10 years -- plenty of time for lawmakers to add those categories back in. As Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., recently said of the measure, "The day it passes, we're going to put in legislation to try to fix it."

Rather than accelerating family immigration under the pretext of **limiting** it, Congress should simply eliminate all the extended-family categories. (One exception: Those who expect to get their visas within one year.) Special immigration **rights** for **relatives** should be **limited** to the spouses and minor children of U.S. citizens; they are -- and should always be -- admitted without any numerical caps. Other **relatives** should be allowed to move here only if they prove their value to the American people as a whole.

Mark Krikorian is executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, a Washington think tank that favors lower immigration.

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