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This immigration policy is a winner. It just needs a champion

di Alexander Kustov

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In 1992, Congress passed the Soviet Scientists Immigration Act, which gave hundreds of weapons scientists and engineers a new pathway to permanent U.S. residency and kept them from selling their expertise to Iran or North Korea. Despite the name, nobody thought of it as immigration legislation, and the bill cleared both chambers easily.

It may seem surprising given America's toxic immigration politics, but the door those scientists came through still exists. And the party that throws it open once again will own the single most popular pro-growth policy in the United States.

The numbers are irrefutable: Roughly 80 percent of American voters support high-skilled immigration. Even more than 70 percent of Trump voters back it. By comparison, expanding nuclear power sits at 59 percent. Building smaller homes closer together polls at just 50 percent. Deregulation has never crossed majority support in 25 years of Gallup tracking.

Nonetheless, the center-left has conceded this ground. Democrats have broadly retreated since President Joe Biden's late-term turn toward immigration enforcement. Abundance writers such as Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson sidestep touting immigration as a growth lever. Even Matt Yglesias, who made an ambitious pro-immigration case in "One Billion Americans," has grown cautious.

The center-right has the same problem, except in reverse. The center of gravity in the party has moved far rightward on the issue since 14 Senate Republicans backed a

compromise containing a path to citizenship for unauthorized immigrants in 2013. Republicans who privately know the country needs foreign scientists avoid saying so for fear of being outflanked on their right.

Vice President JD Vance illustrated the point when he recently described the U.S. space program as built by "American citizens," rejecting any need to "import a foreign class of servants and professors." That erases not just Wernher von Braun, who led the Saturn V program, but the entire Operation Paperclip cohort of more than 1,600 German scientists the U.S. recruited after World War II.

While Washington argues over which immigrants belong, the cost is already showing in the data. CNN has tallied at least 85 top U.S. researchers, including more than a dozen artificial intelligence specialists, who have joined Chinese institutions since early 2024. A March 2025 Nature poll found that three-quarters of U.S.-based scientists are considering leaving. Britain, Singapore, Australia and Canada are actively recruiting them. The U.S. is the only major AI power moving in the other direction.

Both sides have misread the politics in the same way. Immigration in the abstract is toxic, because voters see illegal crossings and visa abuse by people willing to break the rules. But the resulting backlash does not extend to welcoming top talent via specific, well-designed, legal programs.

Even the most anti-immigration voters will support increased entries when the policies are straightforwardly beneficial to the country. I call this demonstrably beneficial immigration, and it is less about rhetoric than design: Programs with visible benefits whose beneficiaries have a stake in defending them and whose opposition is thin can succeed.

Consider the field of AI. About 70 percent of the top AI researchers working in the U.S. were born or educated abroad, as were roughly two-thirds of graduate students in AI-related fields. The American advantage in AI is, to a remarkable degree, an immigration advantage. These are not workers who are displacing Americans. They are the researchers every country in the world is actively bidding for.

But that advantage is under pressure. In September, the Trump administration imposed a $100,000 fee per new H-1B visa petition aimed at deterring firms that the administration argued were using the specialty occupation visa to undercut American workers. Then in March, the Labor Department proposed overhauling the prevailing-wage system in a way that would push required salaries for H-1B and green card workers sharply upward, on similar grounds. Right now, every H-1B hire must be paid a "prevailing wage" meant to match what comparable Americans earn, but the current formula is crude enough that large IT staffing firms routinely game it by paying foreign workers less.

So both these rules have a defensible rationale. But they would also price out the research institutions and early-stage companies that produce the most top talent, because the biggest wage hikes fall on entry-level positions, where research labs and start-ups do most of their hiring.

That's the opposite of what's needed.

Voters will reward the politician or party that advances a well-designed plan to invite in the world's best talent, whether in AI or other promising high-tech fields. Two concrete moves can put that idea to work. And they don't even require action by Congress.

First, expand and encourage greater use of the O-1A extraordinary-ability visa. Unlike the H-1B, this established program for top individuals in fields including the sciences has no numerical cap and no lottery. Far more STEM PhDs and postdocs already in the U.S. would qualify than currently apply, but university hiring offices and corporate HR default to the H-1B lottery out of habit. This visa exists; many more companies and immigrants should use it.

Second, fix how the government sets wages for foreign workers. The Labor Department's March proposal includes an option that would require employers to pay foreign workers what an American with the same job and experience earns, which would close that gap without crushing the research pipeline. That option needs to be the one the agency picks, and the public comment window closes May 26. After that, the choice gets harder to reverse.

In a 2019 Rose Garden speech, President Donald Trump lamented that U.S. rules were pushing the world's top talent elsewhere. "We discriminate against genius. We discriminate against brilliance," he said.

That diagnosis remains correct. The programs are there. All that's missing is a politician to promote them.