

# Making Sense of Immigration Policy

Contributed by PT Editors  
Thursday, 09 August 2007

Everyone seems to have an opinion about immigration policy; Demetrios Papademetriou is one of the few people in Washington who truly understand the issue. In this wide-ranging interview, PT talked with Papademetriou, president and founder of the Migration Policy Institute in DC, about the politics and policies of American immigration—past, present and future.

PT: You’ve been quoted as saying that one of the reasons comprehensive immigration reform failed was because Congress tried to do too much at once. How would you break up the task into its component parts to make the debate more effective?

Papademetriou: The quote that you’re referring to has more to do with the fact that there were so many big, new ideas included in that bill. Ideas that had never been vetted before. You couldn’t expect people to simply buy the entire bundle, because the bundle was negotiated among a cabal of six or 12 senators. If anything, the next bill will have to be even more ambitious than the previous one. Although, I don’t know that it would be wise to mix in the issue of the 12 million people who are already here with a reform of the U.S. immigration system.

The U.S. immigration system was devised 50 years ago—it was debated between 1962 and 1965. Today, this is an entirely different country. We live in a global environment that has no relation to the world we lived in then. So, it’s no surprise that some people have tried to reengineer the system, but they’ve tried to reengineer it in a language that is unfamiliar to most Americans. They left us all guessing as to what it was they were trying to accomplish.

PT: Why couldn’t they articulate the goals of an effective immigration policy?

Papademetriou: I start from the assumption that most of these people that we like to vilify in the Congress are just like you and I. They have goals, they understand the basic issues to a certain degree, and they really want to do something that they consider important for their constituents and the country. But in the process of trying to do all that, they get sucked in by the process.

In this case, they kept adding more extreme measures to the bill to appeal to narrow sections of senators. It was an ill-founded hope that by including the principle idea from someone who really doesn’t like immigration, it would somehow get that person’s vote at the end of the day.

I can give you a specific example. Senator Sessions bent over backward to promote his point system, which he doesn’t completely understand. I’m not attacking point systems on their merits; point systems should be part of what you should have at the end of the day. Not the only part. But at the end of the day, Senator Sessions didn’t vote for it anyway because that wasn’t all he wanted. Multiply this scenario by 5-10 and you realize that you’ve produced an iterative set of changes meant only to gather enough votes to pass a bill.

PT: You mentioned that we live in an entirely different world today from the one we lived in when we last overhauled our immigration system. How have our priorities changed since then?

Papademetriou: Back then, we were experiencing the last legs of an immigration system that had been devised in the 1920s. So, the system from 1962-1965 was as unreflective of what the United States needed to do at that time as the current system is today.

So, in the 1920s, we devised a system that was essentially an ethnicity and country of origin-biased system. People from Western and Northern Europe were desired and we gave them quite a bit of latitude. Immigrants that had come over from the 1890s to the early 1910s were consequently severely restricted because they were deemed "unassimilable." These were Greeks, Italians, people from Asia Minor, and other southern Europeans. The policy was constructed to bring these people in with an eyedropper.

By 1965, we realized that we lived in a different world and we were making immigration policy by exception. If you jump forward to the last 15 years, you'll notice that we're making immigration policy by exception once again. The bill in 1990 that created the H-1B program and other policies like it are simply means to bypass the regular immigration system because it no longer serves the role of the United States in the world economy. That's why we opened up the H-1B status, and why we keep adding categories in the one part of the system that was still flexible. We've done it because the main part of the system has become completely sclerotic.

PT: Does our integration in the global economy mean that our future immigration system will be tilted heavily toward economic concerns instead of family or asylum cases?

Papademetriou: In 2007, we now have an argument as to whether we should even have a family immigration system or not. Well, that's entirely the wrong question! Family has to continue to play a role in this. Refugees have to continue to come here because, first of all, we've signed our country's name to certain international legal instruments with certain rules.

But guess what? The United States is a global economy. We've told our corporate citizens that they have to learn to adapt to survive in this global economy that we've created. But when it comes to having access to immigrants, you can only do so in the numbers that a political process has developed.

A bunch of people up on the Hill and special interests negotiate these numbers. They decide. Why? That's not how it should work. We have to basically liberate the system from these decisions. Any number that anyone sets is wrong. Any number. The Congress does not have the means to determine the correct number for plumbers, IT types, or cooks or anyone else. It does not have the means to do so.

PT: Are there some countries that get it right? Could we look to any countries as models of sound, effective immigration policy?

Papademetriou: Yes, there are countries that really work hard at it. There is no country that gets it more than 60% right. We get maybe 15% right. The Europeans get maybe 3% right. The Canadians, Australians and New Zealanders get it somewhere between 50 and 70% right. How do they do it? They constantly work at it. Constantly. They start from a different assumption than we do as well. They start from the premise that immigration policy isn't something that you legislate and then go to sleep for 40 years. This is something that you try and try again, and try again and then try again.

PT: Closing thoughts?

Papademetriou: We cannot continue to have a system that ratifies the decisions of smugglers, people who just want to reunify with their relatives, and employers who simply want cheap labor. At the end of the day, we have to put all of these things into a mix and discuss them. When we don't have the answers, we should go out and find them.

PT: Mr. Papademetriou, thank you for your time.

Demetrios Papademetriou is co-founder and President of the Migration Policy Institute, a Washington-based think tank dedicated exclusively to the study of international migration. He is also the co-convenor of the Transatlantic Task Force on Immigrant Integration. He holds a PhD in Comparative Public Policy and International Relations (1976) and has taught at the universities of Maryland, Duke, American, and New School for Social Research. He has held a wide range of

senior policy and research positions that include: Chair of the Migration Committee of the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD); Director for Immigration Policy and Research at the U.S. Department of Labor and Chair of the Secretary of Labor's Immigration Policy Task Force; and Executive Editor of the International Migration Review.