Hello, I’m Greg Hill, a professor in the Department of Public Policy and Administration, and my research examines immigration policy and management, focusing primarily on illegal immigration.

Immigration is a super charged, emotional issue, and it is rare that I find anyone who is apathetic to the subject. In fact, it can certainly be counted as one of the most polarizing policies in the US, and interestingly, it always has been. Whether it was the Puritan immigrants in the 17th Century, or the Central American immigrants of the 21st Century, immigration has been as much a part of American history as any other major policy. Both illegal and legal immigration evoke strong emotional responses, and as a policy, one of its unique attributes is that it is not constrained to a particular political party or a particular time.

Believe it or not, there are approximately 11 million illegal immigrants in the United States today! And the annual cost of illegal immigration is approximated at somewhere between $10 billion $113 Billion!

Thus, policy questions abound; for example:

- Under what conditions do we allow illegal immigrants to work in the US?
- Do we allow them access to driver’s licenses?
- Do we allow them access to social services?
- Should their children go to public schools?
- How do we tax them?

Can it possibly be true that illegal immigrants are costing states $113 billion? The short answer is no, but what lies at the heart of the discussion is not so much the total amount (although that is important), but the range of the projections, and the vast ambiguity that surrounds the issue. My work is designed to look at the policy questions, and employing social science techniques, search for systematic ways to test these assertions.

In this podcast, I will discuss what immigration policy is and its place in the American political landscape; present a brief history of immigration in the United States, followed by some ways to think about immigration policy in a more systematic way. I will conclude by illustrating how my most recent work in immigration policy seeks to address some of these issues.

**Immigration policy defined**

So what is immigration policy? A fairly agreed upon definition of immigration policy is any policy that deals with the movement of persons across its borders into the country. Immigration policies usually center on immigrants who intend to enter the country for work-related reasons. One of the most polarizing issues surrounding immigration is whether or not the power to manage immigration should lie
with the states or the federal government. Immigration falls under the border protection and commerce regulation clauses of the Constitution, and by default, then, is a national issue, regulated by the federal government. That said, much of the social and financial burden of immigration, particularly illegal immigration, lies at the state level. We have then, a very interesting federalism question.

One of the primary arguments for state level regulation is that while the federal government has the responsibility to manage immigration, it is negligent in the implementation of the policy, and therefore states can and should provide that support.

For example, from 2005-2009, there were 948 proposed state immigration-related bills. In 2009 there were 353 in 46 states; in 2010 there were 356 in 47 states. As of June 30, 2011 there were 257 bills proposed in 40 states.

Some conventional wisdom arguments surrounding illegal immigration are:

- They take our jobs.
- They don’t pay taxes.
- They drain our social services and fill our jails.

My work is to look at these conventional arguments as empirical questions, and determine the validity of them using social scientific methodologies. The salience of this topic is palpable.

At this point, we might ask ourselves, why do people immigrate? The choice to immigrate is a huge, life changing decision. While describing individual-level reasons is not possible, we can make some conjectures about general reasons. Simply put, the place people are heading is better than the place they are leaving. Potato farmers in Ireland in the late 1800’s saw survival in the US as a better than in Ireland, Puritans of the 1600s saw the religious opportunities to be better in the US than in England. Said in a slightly more complex way; the benefits of leaving outweigh the costs associated with the assimilation to the immigrating state. Rational thinking individuals will often make some attempt at a cost/benefit analysis before making huge, life-changing decisions, and if the decision is to immigrate, it is to suggest that whatever it takes to get there will be outweighed by the benefits upon arrival.

History

The image of immigration has been synonymous with the United States, and arguably, was one of the founding principles. We have an image of the Statue of Liberty, holding her torch and tablet, proclaiming to the world that the United States is open to the idea of immigrants. There have been major waves of immigration to the US, most of them legal, many of them illegal. They came for myriad reasons, some of them economic, some of them religious, some of them social, some of them political. There have been four major waves of immigration to the US:

- The first wave was in the 17th century through 1775, or the Colonial period. We saw approximately 700,000 immigrants, mostly from England,
- The 2nd wave was from 1820-1870, which brought about 7.5Mill immigrants. 1/3rd were Irish, about 1/3rd from Germany,
• The 3rd wave was from 1881-1920, which saw approximately 23Mill immigrants,
• And finally, the 4th wave is from 1965-present, where half are from Latin America.

Along the way we have seen innumerable iterations of laws to restrict or invite immigrant flow, depending on the economic and socio-political environment.

**Ways to think about immigration, particularly illegal immigration**

With the historical context in place, we can look at ways to frame the immigration debate. One of the greatest challenges of doing research in the field of immigration policy is the inability of policy makers, media, and the general public to articulate terms. What does the term, “immigration,” mean?

To deal with this challenge, I have adapted a framework originally presented by Professor Aristide Zolberg in his book, *A Nation by Design* (2006). I call this framework, the Optimal Immigration Framework. The basis of the Framework is in the construction of costs versus benefits. Without often saying it, most people who are concerned with immigration are concerned about costs and benefits, particularly as it relates to illegal immigration, where the balance of my work is focused. In a word, illegal immigration either costs the country millions of dollars in lost revenues and payment for social services, or benefits the country by keeping costs low and competitive, providing a workforce that is willing to do work otherwise undesirable. Let me explain the Optimal Immigration Framework as follows:

Imagine if you will, that immigration is made up of two components; the economic component, and the socio-political component.

• The **economic component** is paramount to policies or attitudes relating to supply and demand of the workforce. On one end of the spectrum, we might argue that immigrant labor strengthens the free market environment by increasing competition among any host of goods and services, keeping costs to the consumer down, and causing the producer to react appropriately. We might suggest then that immigrant labor is a vital component to keeping the economy vibrant and competitive, particularly in the global markets that business operates in today. On the other end of the spectrum, we might argue that immigrant labor weakens the free market environment by artificially driving production costs down, depressing competition, and having an adverse effect on the delicate balance of Adam Smith’s invisible hand. The continuum between these two ends of the spectrum represents the economic component of the Optimal Immigration Framework.

• The other, equally important piece to this Framework is the **socio-political component**. The socio-political component is paramount to policies or attitudes related to the cultural impacts of immigration. On one end of the spectrum, we might feel that the diversity added by immigrants strengthens the community, state or nation, and as such, should be encouraged. Different points of view encourage different ways of approaching problems. Immigrants’ assorted experiences can add diversity of thought and new ideas. An example might be the migration of German Jews during WWII,
among which were the likes of Albert Einstein and Henry Kissinger. Thus, immigration tends to strengthen the socio-political environment. Conversely, some might argue that immigration has negative effects on culture and environment, arguing that immigrants do not assimilate, costing the state money vis-à-vis educational costs, social service provision, and incarceration. In fact, one of the most prolific arguments of negative social costs centers on national security. All of the 9/11 terrorists were immigrants (some were in the country illegally, others were legal). Post 9/11 concerns center on protecting the borders from illegal entry, and the rule of law, which is to say that coming across the border without proper authorization is illegal, and as such, is punishable, as that is the law. Thus, a prevailing xenophobic current may be running through communities.

All of these arguments have adherents and opponents. Discussing them in a systematic way helps bring people to a common place in the discussion. Let me describe it in a visual manner:

**Optimal Immigration Framework**

![Optimal Immigration Framework Diagram](image)

Perception of Socio-Political Effects

- IV
- I
- III
- II

Perception of Economic Effects
Imagine that the economic and socio-political conditions just described coexist on cross-cutting axes. The horizontal axis is labeled “perception of economic effects,” or economic attitudes, the left side representing the negative attitudes and the right side representing positive attitudes. The vertical axis, which bifurcates the horizontal axis, is labeled “perception of socio-political effects,” or socio-political attitudes, the bottom of the axis representing negative attitudes and the top representing positive attitudes. What we have then, is four quadrants, as if looking at a clock divided on the quarter-hour. The north east quadrant, labeled Quadrant 1, represents a continuum of those who have positive attitudes towards both the economic and socio-political contributions of immigrants. Quadrant 2, or the southeast quadrant, represents those with positive attitudes regarding economic contributions, but negative socio-political attitudes. Quadrant 3, or the southwest quadrant, represents the negative attitudes towards both components, and finally, Quadrant 4, or the Northwest quadrant, represents positive socio-political contributions but negative economic contributions.

So where does all of this Framework talk get us? It circles back to costs and benefits. We can see that when individuals view immigrants in a positive light, both politically and economically (identified in Q1), the perception of the benefits of immigration are concentrated, and the costs are diffused, meaning that, for example, the chicken farmers are benefitting financially in Alabama because they have access to a willing labor force that is relatively inexpensive. That’s the benefit. The costs are diffused across the general population, which means that paying for the education or health costs are not attributable to a single source, rather evenly distributed. Thus, the benefits of immigrants are perceived as greater than the costs, so individuals or policy makers are more likely to support pro-immigration policies. Conversely, if you find yourself in quadrant 3, with negative attitudes towards both economic and socio-political components, you would most certainly interpret benefits and costs differently. You would see benefits as being diffuse, that is, the addition of immigrant populations don’t necessarily benefit any one sector, such as the Alabama chicken farmers, as they cost native born citizens jobs, or depress the local economic competition. You would also see costs as being concentrated because you are not identifying immigrants as benefits, so any provision to the immigrant is provision away from the native born, or those adding legitimately to the tax base. Thus, if you identified yourself in quadrant 3, you would likely find yourself in support of anti-immigration policies.

The great challenge in all of this is trying to determine if the perceptions of policy makers and the public with respect to costs and benefits (where they lie on the continuum) are consistent with what is actually going on, particularly in the arena of illegal immigration.

Current research and policy alternatives

I am currently engaged in trying to determine the reliability and validity of political questions surrounding illegal immigration using the Optimal Immigration Framework. My work attempts to
provide empirical evidence on which the public, the media, and policymakers can base assumptions, rather than basing assumptions on anecdotes, hearsay, or personal experience. Are the statements presented at the beginning of this podcast factually accurate? Do illegal immigrants take native born jobs? Are illegal immigrants packing the jails and emergency rooms? Are children of illegal immigrants having a negative effect on school performance? The challenge in this work of course, is that by definition, illegal immigrants are very difficult to count, given their illegality. Thus, the work is slow and laborious, but we have been addressing some interesting questions. The most apropos analysis to date is the work we are doing with undocumented students.

In 2008 I was sitting in the living room of a gentleman who lives in an agricultural community who was lamenting the fact that the recent car accident on his street corner was costing the county a ton of money because the people involved in the wreck were illegal immigrants and surely did not have health insurance. He also asserted that the children of these illegal immigrants were affecting the overall performance of his children’s educational experience. This seemed like an interesting set of assertions, which ultimately led to an empirical analysis to determine if his assertions were true. Using a fairly advanced statistical technique and dataset of over 10,000 school districts in the state of Texas over a 10 year period, what I found, surprisingly, was that increasing the number of undocumented students in a school had no measurable effect on the overall test scores! This contradicts the conventional wisdom argument. I had been hearing for years of the negative effects of illegal immigrants on educational performance, and the evidence from my work suggests that is just not the case. A little befuddled, my coauthor and I decided to expand our analysis to other performance indicators, such as dropout rates, ACT and SAT scores, school spending, and so on, and simply could not find evidence that undocumented students affected measurable performance variables.

The educational example is just one example of the political nature of immigration policy. No one is arguing that the United States’ current immigration policy is working perfectly, but what I and many others are doing is trying to determine the factual reality of the conventional wisdom.

Policy solutions

So what are some policy solutions? I am often asked this question, and the answer is: it’s complicated. An overarching amnesty policy violates the tenants of fairness and justice. An overarching deportation policy violates the tenants of economy and reason. The estimated effect, for example, on the agricultural sector if all illegal immigrants were simply rounded up and deported is a net loss of about $650Billion! Not to mention the replacement costs to keep the sector from collapsing. One way we can look at policy alternatives is through incentives. Migration is all about incentives! If we believe that immigration is a function of costs vs. benefits, and potential immigrants are willing to pay the costs if the benefits are greater, then we ought to think about changing the incentive structure. If we are concerned about illegal immigration from Mexico, then rather than spending $5 billion on a border fence, invest $5 billion in the Mexican economic infrastructure, incentivizing potential Mexican workers to remain in place. The reasons many are coming to the States are for work, and thus, take the work to them. This is just one policy alternative that takes a proactive, rather than a punitive approach.
Conclusion

The long and short of immigration policy is that it is super-charged, it is emotional, and it is not going away. The policy is steeped in the political traditions of the United States, and an issue that is on the forefront of nearly every major political debate. If you would like to read more about my work on undocumented students, please contact me at greghill@boisestate.edu.

I hope you found this podcast to be informative and interesting. I’m Greg Hill from the Department of Public Policy and Administration at Boise State University.