

# In Defense of Immigration

**Proskauer For Good** on **June 14, 2019**

In *A Nation of Immigrants*, President John F. Kennedy traced America's mixed record of embracing new immigrants, and then emphasized the benefits of immigration as he argued in favor of reforming the system. "Nativism failed," he concluded, "not because the seeds were not there to be cultivated, but because American society is too complex for an agitation so narrowly and viciously conceived to be politically successful."

More than 50 years later, American society has grown more complex but now finds itself with increasingly restrictive immigration policies. During a panel discussion hosted at Proskauer's New York office this month, [Valarie McPherson](#), Savanna Sosa and I surveyed recent developments in immigration policy, especially as they relate to restricting asylum, and shared insights from our [recent trip to Mexico](#), and Jeremy Robbins, the executive director of [New American Economy \(NAE\)](#), a bipartisan advocacy and research organization, addressed how we can change the immigration narrative for real reform.

Jeremy acknowledged that anti-immigrant sentiment has resonated in various parts of the country but pointed to several successful reform efforts on the state and local level. He cited success in Arkansas, for example, which recently passed legislation providing DACA recipients access to in-state tuition at public colleges and universities. Now in 90 communities, NAE works with policymakers, business, and civic leaders to promote policies and programs that build support for immigration, and that recognize the value immigrants add. Thanks to these efforts there now are at least 30 municipal offices dedicated to immigrant inclusion, and 23 local strategic plans for immigrant integration.

There is a broad consensus among economists that immigration is a positive force for the economy. Nevertheless, many citizens believe immigrants represent a threat to their way of life, a challenge Jeremy believes can be overcome. Focusing on conservative states, NAE illustrates the economic case for immigration, and demonstrates immigrant contributions to American culture through film, food, art, sports, comedy, and more. NAE's theory is that raising exposure to the positive contributions of immigrants increases the general acceptance of immigration.

The effectiveness of NAE's approach is supported by research. Jeremy explained a recent [Harvard University study](#) where a small number of Spanish speakers were deployed in 18 commuter train stations in homogeneous communities every day, at the same time, for two weeks. Although people exposed to the Spanish speakers underwent a strong exclusionary shift in their attitudes toward immigration (as compared to a control group), this effect weakened with repeat contact. Similarly, [the Washington Post](#) cited a survey that concluded "in rural areas where less than 2 percent of the population are immigrants, less than 4 in 10 residents say immigrants strengthen the country. But that rises to nearly 6 in 10 in rural areas where at least 5 percent are born outside the United States." In sum, there is strong support for the notion that anti-immigrant sentiment ["reduces when \[people in the majority\] have positive interactions with immigrants."](#)

Our country is the product of immigration, and yet it is undeniable that some view immigrants as a threat to our own identity. This cultural insecurity cannot be ignored and can be addressed directly on the grassroots level. We should not forget what President Kennedy observed 50 years ago, which applies equally today: "Everywhere immigrants have enriched and strengthened the fabric of American life."

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