

## **The RAISE Act Would Separate Families and Harm Our Economy**

S.354, the “Reforming American Immigration for Strong Employment Act” (“RAISE Act”), introduced by Senator Tom Cotton (R-AR) and Senator David Perdue (R-GA), would decimate the family-based immigration system and cut in half the number of green cards available in any given year. Asian Americans Advancing Justice | AAJC is alarmed by this restrictionist legislation that would keep families apart and roll back the transformative progress our country has made over the past half century. S.354 would dismantle the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 that created the existing family-based immigration system and finally allowed immigrants from non-European countries to come to the U.S. in larger numbers, creating the diversity we see in America today. The 1965 law reunited countless American families with their loved ones abroad and eliminated the previous racist national origin quotas that heavily favored European immigrants.

Though it has no “merit-based” immigration provisions, S.354 or something similar is purportedly part of the Administration’s plans for changing our immigration system to a “merit-based system.” In justifying their bill, the Senators explicitly blame immigrants for the declining wages of some native-born workers. We reject this false dichotomy of being pro-immigrant or pro-American worker. Congress should focus on policy solutions that promote economic security and prosperity for all members of our society, immigrant and native-born alike.

### **S.354 proposes the following harmful changes to our immigration system. It would:**

- **Cut the number of immigrants provided green cards in half.** The bill would immediately cut the number of green cards made available in any given year by 41 percent in the first year, and by year ten reduce the number down to 50 percent of today’s levels.
- **End the family immigration system.** The bill would strip the rights of U.S. citizens to apply to bring their parents, siblings, and adult children to the United States as lawful permanent residents; and eliminate the ability of lawful permanent residents to sponsor their unmarried adult children for green cards. Essentially, the only people who would be able to sponsor family members are U.S. citizens and lawful permanent residents who would be able to sponsor their spouse and any children under 21 years of age. Additionally, the bill lowers the number of green cards allocated for family-based sponsorship to a mere 88,000 per year. This is much lower than the current levels. In FY2015, around 673,000 people received green cards through the family-based system (many of the people who received green cards were already living in the US). This bill would also cut off US citizen children born in the U.S. from sponsoring their undocumented parents. Currently, only some of parents may adjust and only if they meet the strenuous waiver requirements.
- **Eliminate the Diversity Lottery.** The bill would end this pathway which allows up to 50,000 people to immigrate annually from countries with low rates of immigration to the United States. Asian countries that are eligible for the diversity lottery for FY2017 include, but are not limited to, Nepal, Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Laos, Cambodia, Taiwan, Japan and all Middle Eastern and Central Asian countries.

- **Cap the number of refugees allowed in to the US to 50,000 per year.** This is significantly lower than previous levels. In FY2016, the US welcomed 84,995 and the number admitted had been trending upward due to the global refugee crisis. President Obama set the refugee level for FY2017 at 110,000, though it was lowered by recent executive orders.<sup>1</sup>

Immigration policy is of vital importance to Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities. There are an estimated **22 million Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders and Native Hawaiian Islanders** living in the United States. While Asian Americans have been part of the fabric of American society for centuries, today, nearly two-thirds of all Asian Americans are foreign-born and **92% of Asian Americans are immigrants or the children of immigrants.** While many have arrived as refugees, asylees, students or through employment-based immigration, the vast majority of AAPIs have arrived through the family immigration system. These immigrants and their children are workers, business owners, caregivers, friends and neighbors that contribute to our economy and communities in a myriad of ways.

**Family unity is a central tenet of our immigration system.** Everyone needs family. Immigration is fundamentally about people planting permanent roots in a new country and should take into account the human need to live with and care for one's family. Family members provide care for children and sick and elderly relatives so that other family members can work. Family members step in to provide support in times of personal and economic hardship. Caretakers, who are predominantly women, spouses, mothers, grandmothers and aunts, do often unpaid and always undervalued work that enables their family members to work outside the home and contribute to our economy.

**Family immigration is good for the economy and our country.** Together, families buy homes and start businesses that create jobs. Many immigrant business owners came through our family-based immigration system. Immigrants started 28% of all new U.S. businesses in 2011, despite accounting for just 12.9% of the U.S. population. 1.9 million Asian American owned businesses provided 3.6 million jobs and had receipts of \$700 billion in 2012. A person's educational attainment is not a measure for the creativity, entrepreneurial spirit or grit to open a small business or create innovation.

**All people are valuable.** While the economy is important, we should be careful not to create an immigration system that treats people like commodities. It is vital that the U.S. continues to be a safe haven for those seeking refuge from violence and persecution. We take pride in the idea of America as a land of opportunity for all. We are further concerned that a "merit-based system" will prioritize the immigration of men over women due to gender discrimination in other countries where women do not have equal educational or employment opportunities.

**All work is valuable.** Our current employment-based visa only allows certain types of high-skilled workers to come to the US and does not provide a path for many immigrants who truly need economic opportunities. Most low-wage workers come through the family-based immigration system or are undocumented and fill vital roles in our economy.

**The "merit-based immigration system" is part of an anti-immigrant restrictionist agenda.** The President has called for a new "merit-based immigration system." While S.354 does not directly address

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<sup>1</sup> As of this writing, the Executive Order setting the refugee limit to 50,000 is currently blocked by a federal court.

the employment-based immigration system, it is apparent that some in the Trump Administration see S.354 as a key piece of the “merit-based system.”

**S.354 is part of a dangerous narrative seeking to vilify and scapegoat immigrants for all of society’s problems.** In justifying this bill, Senator Cotton blames immigrants for the declining wages of native-born workers with a high school education or less. This bill is part of a larger strategy to attack immigrants. The refugee and Muslim ban and the creation of the Victims of Immigration Crime Engagement office, (“VOICE”) office to vilify immigrants are other pieces to that effort. Studies have consistently shown that immigrants are not to blame for declining wages or unsafe communities. This notion is completely unfounded and fosters an offensive race-baiting and xenophobic narrative.

**Our immigration system should reflect our values.** Our family-based immigration system has served our nation well. We should maintain an immigration system that is true to our American values and spirit as a land of opportunity for all types of people regardless of their race, religion, national origin, gender or educational attainment. As a nation, we are stronger and at our best when we recognize and respect the contributions of all those who call America home. AAPIs and immigrants are America’s families, workers, and neighbors seeking to build the American dream.