

IMMIGRATION: VALUES AND SENSE

Our immigration system is broken. An estimated 12 million undocumented workers live in America, easily exploited by unscrupulous employers. Hundreds of thousands come each year, looking to support their families.

This mass migration, like the previous ones in our history, is driven by need: impoverished workers seeking a way to support their families. It has been exacerbated by the failure of our trade and development policies and facilitated by lax enforcement of our own labor laws. In Mexico, NAFTA proved costly for ordinary workers, uprooting peasants from their land and driving them north looking for work.¹

At the same time that global forces are pushing workers to our borders, employers are pulling immigrants into jobs in the shadow economy, where they can be easily exploited. Employers are creating an underclass that lowers the floor on wages and working conditions for all.

Scapegoating won't solve the problem. Each wave of immigration in American history has roused racial fears. Each new group has been charged with being a source of crime. Each has been blamed for undermining our economy. Each has been accused of refusing to assimilate.

And yet each wave—whether voluntary or enslaved, sanctioned or illegal—has ended up contributing to our economy and enriching our society. We must fix our broken immigration system using common sense and American values.

THE CHALLENGE

Each year this decade between 700,000 and 1.2 million immigrants are admitted legally into the United States through a hodgepodge of programs with confusing quotas and categories.² The number of visas available every year is arbitrary and was set by Congress more than a decade ago. Wait times for legal visas can be as long as 22 years, resulting in a massive backlog of eligible applicants.

In turn, the undocumented worker population grows by an estimated 500,000 each year.³ More come from Mexico than any other nation. Since NAFTA took effect 14 years ago, the number of people crossing the border illegally has more than doubled. Mexican workers' wages have plunged, and traditional Mexican village agriculture has been disrupted. Millions leave their villages to find a way to support their families.

Current U.S. immigration policy was developed in the 1960s during a very different economic era. Today, the doors of legal immigration are

HOT QUOTE

"We need to enforce the rule of law. We need to enforce our nation's laws. But in order to do so, we have to have laws that we can enforce."

REP. JEFF FLAKE

26 September 2005

too narrow—and the policing of employers who hire undocumented workers is too weak. In addition, employers using the guest worker program have manipulated the system into a form of indentured servitude. Workers are often abused, malnourished, housed in squalid conditions and cheated out of pay.

We have only begun to have a debate about what our immigration policy should be. Traditionally, America's acceptance of migrants has always followed the ebbs and flows of our labor needs. Today we face a new challenge, as a global economy designed by and for multinational corporations is undermining workers at home and abroad. More and more people are desperate to come here to make a living, while more American workers fear that a flood of immigrants will drag down wages that are already under pressure.

We must adapt to the new realities of the global economy and strike a common sense solution that fixes a broken immigration system, secures our borders, nourishes our economy and respects all workers.

THE CONSERVATIVE FAILURE

President Bush and the congressional conservatives failed to enact comprehensive immigration reform and let an untenable situation fester. They are frozen because their core constituencies are split. Corporations want cheap labor. Anti-immigrant right-wing ideologues push unworkable proposals such as mass deportation and construction of a giant wall along our southern border. The result: gesture and rhetoric but no reform.

Bush's efforts to pass needed comprehensive reforms were blocked by his own party. Meanwhile, the Bush team has actually made it easier for employers to exploit immigrant workers by denying them basic labor rights. A promised crackdown on employers was just talk: a mere 17 firms faced penalties in 2007.

Efforts to construct a border wall, as a sop to nativists, proceeded. But the planned wall has proven to be more about politics than protection—it would bypass land owned by Bush patrons and private resorts but divide middle-class homes and family farms.

The immigration debate has been driven by fake populists who label any reform as “amnesty,” and seek to play on our divisions and fears. Such attempts failed to help Republicans keep control of Congress in 2006, as the party lost support from both Latino and white voters. But the poisonous rhetoric has its effects, with sensible social reforms at the state and local levels often being blocked by anger and fears about spending “our money” on “those people.” Latinos face increased hostility. And families have been torn apart as harsh crackdowns for show take the place of sensible policy.

THE PROGRESSIVE SOLUTION

Comprehensive immigration reform is essential. America deserves an immigration system that protects all workers and at the same time guarantees the safety of our nation without compromising our fundamental civil rights and civil liberties.

The flood of undocumented workers must be stemmed. The nation must have greater control over its borders, particularly in an age of terrorism. We should dramatically increase security at our borders and ports. Beef up the border patrol, and stiffen penalties for human trafficking. At the same time, relieve pressure on the border by easing legal access and offering enough visas to meet the demand for labor.

We should crack down on businesses that run exploitative workplaces. Punish employers that hire undocumented workers for unfair wages. Strengthen workers' ability to join unions. Raise the minimum wage every year to keep pace with inflation. Step up enforcement of wage and labor laws.

We need to provide undocumented immigrants with a path to earned citizenship. We do not want to lock 12 million people into the shadows, with no way for them to be integrated into our society. And it would simply trample any sense of American decency—and run up prohibitive costs—to attempt to round up and deport 12 million people, dividing them from their children who were born here and have the right to citizenship.

Undocumented immigrants who work, pay taxes, obey the law and receive no preferential treatment over other immigrants should be allowed to earn citizenship after paying penalties and learning English. Once they are out of the shadows and fully contributing to our economy, we can defuse distracting battles over providing health care, educating children and granting drivers licenses.

Ironically, the most effective policy is presently the least popular. We should be reversing the trade and monetary policies that have disrupted Mexican agriculture and driven people off the land, first into the cities and then further north to the United States, looking for work. We should be developing policies and providing assistance to create greater economic opportunities in Mexico.

People abandon their homes and accept the risks of crossing the border unlawfully mainly because they are forced to do so. When Europe absorbed Spain, Portugal and Greece into its common market, there was no mass migration, in part because comprehensive economic planning and development helped to lift up the economies of those countries.

If we don't do all of it at the same time, we're going to solve none of it. Those who say all we need are sticks are posturing, not problem solving. Americans need and want a solution.

HOT QUOTE

"My 10-year-old daughter says anybody who wants to be part of America—and is willing to risk their life to get here—seems to me to be ready to be an American."

FRANK SHARRY

National Immigration Forum, May 15, 2006

MAKING THE CASE

You know the challenge we face. You know how conservatism failed. You know how a progressive vision can move us forward. How do you crystallize the argument, deliver the key facts and take down conservative spin? Below are the tools you need to make the case in your community.

Core Arguments

Our immigration system is broken, with hundreds of thousands of people risking their lives each year to illegally cross the border only to be easily exploited by unscrupulous employers.

Proof Points

- An estimated 12 million people live in the U.S. without documentation, a figure that grows by 500,000 each year.⁴
- Since NAFTA took effect 14 years ago, the number of people crossing the border illegally from Mexico has more than doubled.⁵
- 400 people die each year trying to cross the border.⁶
- Wait times for legal visas can be as long as 22 years.⁷

Conservatives have failed to act because they are frozen between corporate contributors who want cheap labor and right-wing nativists who profit from posturing.

- Republicans, split between corporations wanting cheap workers and anti-immigrant ideologues wanting an unworkable border wall, couldn't pass comprehensive reform.
- The planned wall has proven to be more about politics than protection, bypassing Bush patrons and private resorts, while dividing middle-class homes and family farms.⁸
- The Bush administration promised a crackdown on employers, but only 17 firms faced penalties for hiring undocumented workers in 2007.⁹

To get something done, we need comprehensive reform. If we don't do all of it at the same time, we're going to solve none of it.

- Get tough on the border. Get tough on employers.
- Provide a path to earned citizenship, and increase visas for legal entry.
- End NAFTA-style trade that has undermined our region's economy. Build a new Alliance for Progress to provide hope in Latin America.

Spotlight Stories

Rep. Tom Tancredo is the loudest anti-immigrant zealot—except when it comes to his home. Undocumented immigrants helped remodel U.S. Rep. Tom Tancredo’s Littleton basement, two of the workers told the *Denver Post*.

The workers said they were among a crew of five or six people who labored for contractor Creative Drywall Design of Denver, creating a home theater with terraced seating, a billiards table and game area, and a bedroom for Tancredo, a Republican and one of the nation’s most vocal immigration critics.

All but one of the crew were undocumented immigrants from Latin America, according to two of the workers....Tancredo didn’t break any laws, according to immigration lawyers briefed on the case. He never asked whether the workers—only two of whom spoke English—were in the country legally, said Eric Givan, project manager for the company...

...Tancredo “doesn’t want us here, but he’ll take advantage of our sweat and our labor,” said one of the workers. “It’s just not right.”

From *Denver Post*, September 19, 2002.¹⁰

An immigration raid at a major North Carolina pork-packing plant provoked protests yesterday from union officials, who said the company, Smithfield Foods, had collaborated with the authorities searching for illegal immigrants to discourage its workers from organizing. 18 Mexicans and 3 Guatemalans whom the Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers said were in this country illegally were deported. Gene Bruskin, an organizer for the United Food and Commercial Workers Union, said the company had started to cooperate closely with immigration authorities after a walkout by immigrant workers last summer. He said, “My concern is the company is using the immigration issue to manipulate this long fight over workers’ rights.”

From *New York Times*, January 26, 2007.¹¹

Conservative Spin

Granting citizenship to illegal immigrants is nothing but amnesty for lawbreakers.

Progressive Response

- With comprehensive immigration reform, those who broke the law to get here would not receive a free pass. Those who have been hard working and law abiding while they have been here should be penalized with a serious fine, put at the back of the line for citizenship, and learn English. That is far better than locking them in the shadows or posturing about rounding up 12 million people and shipping them home.

English needs to be our official language.

- As part of a comprehensive immigration reform, those who came here illegally certainly should be required to learn English before earning citizenship. The reality is today's immigrants, just as others did before them, are pushing their children to learn English and are proud to be part of America.
- But that is no reason to prohibit government agencies from offering ballots or providing Medicare information in other languages. What we need is more English language instruction, not foreign language prohibitions.

Illegal immigrants lower wages.

- Immigrants don't drive down wages. Unscrupulous employers who exploit immigrants drive down wages. We need to crackdown on bad employers, while bringing undocumented immigrants out of the shadows so no worker gets exploited.
- The Bush administration said it would crackdown on employers, but only a mere 17 employers faced penalties last year. They have failed, and it's time for real leadership to achieve comprehensive reform.

Illegal immigrants are a drain on our services and tax dollars.

- Immigrants actually pay more in taxes than they receive in services.¹² But we don't want to continue a broken system that drives immigrants into an underground economy.
- With comprehensive reform, we will bring immigration out of the shadows, establish a path to earned citizenship and put to rest the divisive battles over providing health care, educating children and granting drivers licenses.

Public Pulse

Americans support comprehensive immigration reform and reject proposals without a path to citizenship.

- 64% of Americans prefer legislation that “provides for increased border security and tougher enforcement, and also includes a path to citizenship for illegal immigrants, which some would call amnesty” over Congress passing “nothing.” (*Tarrance Group and Lake Research Partners, April 2007*)
- 75% of voters are more likely to support a candidate who says, “we need to put an end to illegal immigration by cracking down on unscrupulous corporations who exploit illegal and legal workers.” (*Democracy Corps, December 2007*)
- 2007 polls by CBS News (28%), Fox News (39%), *New York Times* (33%), *ABC/Washington Post* (35%) and *USA Today/Gallup* (24%) found little support for deportation as a solution to illegal immigration, when matched against a plan with a pathway to citizenship.

64%

75%

Anti-immigrant attacks from Republicans backfired in the 2006 congressional elections.

- Comparing exit polls from 2004 and 2006 suggests an 11-point swing among Latino voters in favor of the Democrats. The swing among non-Latino white voters was 6%.
- Close races in which Latinos made up 10% or more of the electorate produced a net gain of four seats for the Democrats.

10%

MORE RESOURCES

Economic Policy Institute, a nonprofit, nonpartisan think tank that focuses on the economic condition of low- and middle-income Americans and their families, <http://www.sharedprosperity.org/>

The Fair Immigration Reform Movement, an organization founded by low-income immigrant and nonimmigrant grassroots community organizations working for immigration reform and immigrant rights with an antipoverty focus, <http://fairimmigration.org/>

National Immigration Forum, an organization that advocates and builds support for public policies that welcome immigrants and refugees, and that are fair and supportive to newcomers in the United States, <http://www.immigrationforum.org/>

National Immigration Law Center, conducts policy analysis and provides technical advice and training to a broad constituency dedicated to promoting the rights and opportunities of low-income immigrants and their family members, <http://www.nilc.org/>

Pew Hispanic Center, a nonpartisan “fact tank” that provides information on the issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world, <http://pewhispanic.org/>

Southern Poverty Law Center, a nonprofit organization that uses litigation to fight injustice and intolerance, <http://www.splcenter.org/news/item.jsp?aid=247>

Audio-Video Content

Economic Policy Institute—A Shared Prosperity, Immigration Reform—Getting it Right, <http://www.sharedprosperity.org/av/20070328.html>

Fair Immigration Reform Movement, National Civil Rights, Labor, Immigration Rights, Faith Groups Speak Out as Immigration Debate Begins, <http://www.fairimmigration.org/press-room/releases/2007/national-civil-rights-labor.html>

Endnotes

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²"2006 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics," Office of Immigration Statistics, September 2007. <http://www.dhs.gov/ximgtn/statistics/publications/yearbook.shtm>

³"The Size and Characteristics of the Unauthorized Migrant Population in the U.S.," Pew Hispanic Center, 7 March 2006. <http://pewhispanic.org/reports/report.php?ReportID=61>

⁴Ibid.

⁵Ibid.

⁶"Immigrant Deaths Near Border Fall," Associated Press, 8 November 2007. Available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/08/us/08border.html>

⁷"Comprehensive Reform of Our Immigration Laws," National Immigration Forum, January 2007. <http://www.immigrationforum.org/documents/TheDebate/ImmigrationReform/CIRBackgrounder.pdf>

⁸See "Holes in the Wall," Texas Observer, 22 February 2008, and "Border Fence Will Slice Through Private Land," Washington Post, 16 February 2008. <http://www.texasobserver.org/article.php?aid=2688> and <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/02/15/AR2008021503303.html>

⁹"Immigrant Crackdown Falls Short," *Washington Post*, 25 December 2007. Available at: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/12/24/AR2007122402025.html>

¹⁰"Illegal Labor Aided Anti-Immigration Congressman from Colorado," *Denver Post*, 19 September 2002

¹¹Julia Preston, "Immigration Raid Draws Protest From Labor Officials," *New York Times*, 26 January 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/26/us/26immig.html?st=cse&sq=immigrant+union+&scp=4>

