

Obstacles in the Path toward a Comprehensive Immigration Reform

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Abstract

The coming of the Obama administration was perceived as the final opportunity to engage policy makers in the articulation of stronger immigration laws. However, the current President has not demonstrated a sound leadership in the advancement of this project, which has concerned both supporters and detractors of the initiative. This paper discusses the significance of the actions of past and present administrations toward the immigration reform in the last two decades. It also explores the complexity of the debate on this issue by analyzing some of the most compelling arguments in favor or against the reform. It further discusses the political implications that a commitment to this project could have for any presidential candidate in the next elections.

Obstacles in the Path toward a Comprehensive Immigration Reform

There is no doubt that the current immigration crisis is related to the presence of several million unauthorized Hispanics who reside in the United States. They come from different countries in Latin America, although most are from Mexico. Immigrants cross the US border daily, seeking work and better living conditions. Although many Americans believe that the presence of foreigners in their country is beneficial, some of them are openly upset about what they perceive as a silent invasion of their territory. A survey conducted by Time magazine states that about 68% of Americans reject illegal immigration, while 82% say that their government does not fully meet the responsibility to protect its borders (Tumulty, 2006, p. 39). In general, almost all of the proposals that have been brought before Congress seek an increase in the number of agents patrolling the border, further detention of undocumented immigrants, and more advanced technology in border control (Black, 1998).

The proposal of President George H.W Bush to carry out a reform of existing immigration laws in his second term had created a high degree of controversy, not only between political and economic sectors of this society, but also among U.S. citizens and different communities of immigrants. Indeed, this critical debate, whose enormous complexity has been analyzed in various newspaper articles and books, does not seem to have a viable resolution. To date, no consensus has been reached, neither about the benefits of immigration, nor the appropriate measures to control the influx of foreigners, or even the immigration status of more than twelve million undocumented Hispanics living in this country (Acereda, 2006).

On his part, President Obama's policies have been a disappointment. He does not have a clear stance or initiative on how to deal with this often debated issue. His message of change has proven to be nothing more than rhetoric in many ways, although he has done his best to bring America out of its present financial and economic crises. The problems that assail America are complex and many, and to his credit Obama has dealt with most of them in a mature and steadfast way. However, the specter of illegal immigration and human trafficking across borders impacts the economy in many ways. It creates a parallel black economy and makes money for traffickers. It creates unreported and untaxed income and employment that is hidden and underpaid. It can even result in human slavery in the worst of living conditions. It puts pressure on the welfare system and way of life. This is why the problem of immigration and its related issues need to be addressed without delay and in a very comprehensive and equitable manner.

President Obama is determined to reform the nation's present immigration system by

1. Continuing to meet the Federal Government's responsibility to securing our national borders;
2. Demanding accountability from businesses that break the law by exploiting undocumented workers and undermining American workers;
3. Strengthening the U.S. economic competitiveness by creating a legal immigration system that reflects our values and diverse needs; and
4. Requiring responsibility from people who are illegally living in the U.S. (Obama. 2008).

It is clear that President Obama understands that the prominence of the U.S. depends on the opportunities given to every person that works hard for the country. His plan states that “If America is to meet the enormous challenges that lie ahead; we must ensure that all of our citizens can fully participate in the American Dream and continue to contribute to our nation’s greatness.” (Obama, 2008, 12).

Further President Obama also understands that the different groups of immigrants that have arrived in this country have come here in search of a better life, the realization of their dreams, and the possibility to live in freedom. His view is that “While most Americans believe in those core principles, immigration policy has been ineffective because it has been exploited by politicians to divide the nation rather than find real solutions. This has made the problem worse, made our borders less secure, and force millions to live in the shadow of our society” (Obama, 2008, 15).

However, in the opinion of legislators, despite his best intentions Obama would have a hard time getting this plan approved as there are wide differences of opinion between Republicans and Democrats on the immigration issue (Grin, 2011). Meanwhile, states not in favor of illegal immigrants are finding out that business and economy are growing faster in places where people accept the problem as inevitable. They have gradually come to the realization that all conclusive actions have to be taken by the Federal Government.

It is clear that the immigration problem has far reaching and multiple effects on our health and welfare system, resources for housing, water and other amenities, jobs,

crime rates, and a host of other things (Camarota, 2004). The present influx of South American and Central American immigrants is alarming, while Mexicans continue to cross the US porous and under-policed borders every day (Skerry, 1993). Most of the illegal immigrants face a lot of danger and hardship in coming to the United States in search of a better life. The American Dream and the promise of freedom, prosperity and equal rights for all is a strong factor for people singling out America as their choice destination. Thus, some immigrants have brought prosperity to America while others have exploited it (Gonzalez, 2002). A quota based immigrant policy like that practiced by the Green Card lottery system seems a good way to approach immigration. The economic value that the immigrant is likely to give must be assessed. At the same time, we should aim to enact stricter laws against illegal immigration, while strengthening the basis for legal immigrants (Leo, 2004; Singer, 2004).

The present study is carried out from a multicultural perspective. It provides an overview of the problem and analyzes the various arguments made for and against the proposed reform. It aims to facilitate the understanding of the topic and to highlight the possible consequences of implementing the various options considered.

Immigration Reform in the 1990s included the formulation of the Immigration Act of 1990, established categories of employment based on immigration status, and placed an overall cap on the number of non-immigrant workers. The Chinese Student Act of 1992 allowed adjustment of status of Chinese nationals who arrived in the U.S. before 1990. The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 not only imposed strict penalties against illegal immigration but also expanded the definition of deportable offences (Fox, 2002, 1)

President Bush had advocated increasing the number of border patrol agents from 9,500 in 2004 to 15,000 in 2008 and adding several hundred federal prosecutors assigned to immigration crimes (Cole, 2009, A1). The Obama Administration has made an effort to pick up on leads that it thinks are beneficial to reducing illegal immigrants that are also involved in criminal activities in the U.S. For instance, it has concentrated on matching fingerprinting, photo and other records collected from crime scenes with other data known about illegal immigrants, leading to their arrest and subsequent deportations. But this approach is also being criticized as it will aid illegal immigrants that do not have a criminal record (McKinley, 2009). Similarly, the Bush administration in its zeal to attack the immigrant problem had prevented them from getting access to good legal counsel, and then arguing that they would be deported because they had lost the case for staying on in the USA. This highly partisan and irregular state of affairs was overturned by Attorney General Eric Holder in June 2009 (Schwartz, 2009. A16).

Before analyzing proposals submitted to Congress, it is necessary to summarize the most significant ideas that fuel the immigration debate. First, unauthorized immigration is rejected because it creates economic, social and health care problems, leading some to consider it a national threat. From an economic standpoint, studies suggest that immigrants not only displace the workforce but also lead to the reduction of wages. It is claimed that the steady increase in the supply of available workers leads many employers to take advantage of illegal immigrants, offering them lower wages than those earned by the unionized national workforce or the legal immigrants.

A report by the Federation for American Immigration Reform, known by its acronym FAIR (1999), provides concrete examples of the phenomenon of job

displacement. According to this study, agricultural businesses such peach farms in Georgia, apple farms in Michigan, and meat packers nation-wide, increased their profits by using undocumented immigrants. A similar situation is observed in the specific case of the furniture and hotel industries, in which Mexican immigrants and Salvadorans, who accepted an average of \$3.50 an hour, have managed to replace the Lock African-American union members, who previously perceived to \$12 per hour, in addition to other benefits. This association, which defends the right of American workers, estimates its members lose about two million jobs annually to undocumented immigrants (p. 32). Meanwhile, immigrant advocates stress that this reliable workforce is necessary for the economy as they perform jobs usually discarded by national workers. According to the Pew Hispanic Center (2005), Hispanic workers both legal and illegal constitute 13% of the country's workforce, with a total of more than 18 million people distributed in the areas of private domestic services, construction, agriculture, food processing and manufacturing, among others (p. 78). It is clear that low wages earned by undocumented workers keep many industries from moving to other countries where the cost of the labor force is even lower than in the United States. Thus, the prices of many products also remain stable, a factor that directly benefits the average citizen by maintaining their purchasing power. In fact, Tumulty (2006) claims that illegal immigrants increase demand and consumption of domestic products, promoting the development of trade and economic growth (p. 43). According to the American Association of Immigration Lawyers (2005) it is estimated that the consumption of goods and services among Hispanics has reached the figure of \$ 926.000 million a year, and much of this expenditure is provided by undocumented immigrants (p. 57). Hispanic

immigrants spend about 80% of their income in the United States. A clear example of the effect of immigration on the local economy can be seen in the contribution of Hispanic residents in North Carolina with expenditures in excess of \$9 billion (Tumulty, 2006, p. 43).

Another argument on immigration that fueled the debate suggests that the increase in the number of undocumented people causes serious social problems. Unfortunately, low levels of schooling, low wages, and large families have favored the formation of population centers with higher poverty and crime rates (Acereda, 2006). The reduction of the American middle class, a phenomenon that has increased since the nineties, is usually associated with increasing irregular migration flows. Statistics from the Pew Hispanic Center (2005) reflect the difficult reality that the average Hispanic family collects less than 10 cents for every dollar earned by an Anglo family (p. 72). It is feared that this marked stratification may eventually lead to social tensions and clashes. National crime rates are also expected to rise as immigrants realize they cannot achieve the desired American dream, and feel doomed to remain in marginal conditions (Tumulty, 2006, p. 43). The chances of these people to achieve social mobility are increasingly remote and this could have a serious impact on both the social welfare system and other public services, especially the health sector.

It is very difficult to find concrete evidence regarding the negative impact of unauthorized immigration to public services, although it is clear that schools and hospitals have significantly increased their spending in the presence of undocumented immigrants. However, it is easy to determine a relationship between the taxes paid to the United States government and the cost of the services received. According to data

presented in 2002, the contributions of undocumented immigrants to the social care system exceeded \$460 billion that year (Tumulty, 2006, p. 43). Presumably, given the irregular situation of these taxpayers, much of this contribution remains in state funds and will not be claimed for retirement.

Two additional factors contribute to the rejection of legal and illegal Hispanic immigrants. On the one hand, some Latinos are accused of causing environmental damage and spreading diseases, many of which had already been eradicated in this country. In addition, Latinos have shown an unwillingness to assimilate and identify with the Anglo idiosyncratic values. For this reason, some blame Hispanics for causing cultural fragmentation among Americans.

In relation to environmental and health aspects, it should be noted that the overall Hispanic population accumulates in large communities near urban areas. Due to lack of resources, many live in small housing units that lack basic services. These conditions of overcrowding and lack of clean environments contribute to the spread of diseases such as tuberculosis, AIDS, and venereal diseases. Moreover, recent years have also seen an increase in diseases typically associated with tropical countries such as cholera and malaria. The latter in particular had been eradicated from the United States in the early twentieth century, but reappeared in the states of California, Texas and New Jersey in the nineties. According to experts of the U.S. Department of Health, mass immigration is directly responsible for the increase in the spread of many diseases, which is why it is imperative to control the entry of foreigners (Lutton, 2005, p. 30).

Other arguments have been made for the lack of assimilation of Hispanics from the linguistic, cultural, and social views. Samuel Huntington's book, "Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identities" (2004), analyzes the danger posed by the obvious 'hispanization' of society. In Chapter 9 of the text: Mexican Immigration and Hispanization, the author raises a number of reasons that most immigrants from neighboring countries demonstrate a deeper sense of loyalty to their countries of origin than to the United States.

Huntington says that the constant and massive flow of immigrants makes both the language and the traditions and customs Hispanic. On the other hand, he argues that given the enormous differences between Latino and Anglo identities, it is unlikely that Hispanics will be either willing or able to join a Protestant Anglo society. Therefore, Hispanic immigration will probably make the United States into a nation with two languages, two cultures and two different human groups (pp. 231-238).

Commenting on the recent spate of illegal immigrants and how they are being treated by the US Justice Department, Solomon Moore says that the Federal Government has shifted its focus on illegal immigration to the detriment of other more serious matters like drug trafficking and homicides and has left the States themselves to deal with these matters. On the other hand, many states have neither the time nor the staff and financial resources to deal with the hundreds of cases that present themselves every day. As many as 200 cases can be processed in a day, with summary judgments being handed out in many cases rather than taking an individual view of the circumstances. Illegal immigration is being treated as just another offence (Moore, A1).

The tolerance level of Hispanic immigration is disappointing to many people. Therefore, it is not surprising that the proposed immigration laws are geared more toward reducing the Latino presence in this country. Then, the idea of an amnesty for the millions of unauthorized people who live and work in this country as was done in 1986 is unacceptable for most of the U.S. population. Among political circles, many alternatives have emerged raising various outputs, making the debate on immigration one of the most critical issues on the national agenda in the current administration.

The following are the main proposals that have come to Congress: Within the Republican Party there have been two bills: one of them is aimed at cracking down on undocumented immigrants and their employers, while the other, a little less severe, promotes the implementation of a temporary visa program for existing irregular workers. Under the first proposal, the government should put in prison all persons who are in the country illegally. Similarly, it should penalize companies that hire them, with fines ranging from \$ 5,000 to \$ 25,000. It requires the construction of a fence along the Southern border. The second proposition raises that all undocumented immigrants wishing to obtain a work visa leave the country within the next five years and that they request the document in their places of origin. It also asks the executive to punish companies that hire undocumented workers, and to implement new technologies to strengthen surveillance at border control.

The Democratic Party is seen more flexible regarding the eventual legalization of many of the undocumented workers in the country. It requires, however, that they have a job, pay their back taxes, speak English and not have a criminal record. As the opposition party, the Democrats also advocate an increase in the number of work

permits to foreigners, support employer sanctions for illegal immigrants and require more effectiveness in protecting the borders.

The paths of the immigration controversy are made up of a dense array of opposing approaches, some of which are based on reliable statistical data, while others are based on myths, exaggerations, or even pure speculation. Moreover, there is a marked tendency by activists to ignore the views of those on the opposing side of the debate. This attitude explains the failure of the efforts of individuals who try to find a viable formula that addresses the concerns of the majority of the parties involved. It must start from the premise that both immigration and emigration have positive and negative effects on societies.

This essay uses a combination of the available literature on the subject, as well as statistical reports and periodicals that discuss government policy and documentation on this issue. It is clear that various initiatives have been brought onto the table for discussion at various times in the last several years, but concerted and determined efforts have been found decidedly wanting. Even the physical deterrent of a planned steel fence was not effective, and made the butt of jokes in the second Bush era. The problem is not only the resolve and the manpower to police our borders, but we also have to outthink the human traffickers and smugglers who are making money out of this lucrative business. No doubt there is the human element too, where human rights issues are used to cause a positive result in the courts. On the other hand, countries like Australia are far stricter on the issue of illegal immigration. They contend that each illegal immigrant puts not only a burden on the government but cannot be supported by legal means if he chooses to enter the country through illegal and dubious pathways.

His intent to deceive is clear from the outset. In ordinary circumstances he would never be allowed to enter the country.

Notwithstanding America's ideals as the land of opportunity, the land of the free and where it is touted that anyone who works hard and long enough with the given resolve can achieve a life of fulfillment and happiness- it is time to act according to present realities. According to those who oppose Hispanic immigration the inflow if not stemmed will overtake America. They believe that if America gains by getting illegal aliens to work on drastically reduced rates, it loses by having to provide the same government amenities and protection to them as to legal and Americans. Another consideration is that if undocumented workers are underpaid, they might take to a life of crime. If they are undernourished, they would either resort to stealing or fall sick. If they are psychologically unstable, they would become a walking time bomb, posing a threat to life and property of regular citizens. For these reasons, many feel that illegal immigrants are a burden on the rest of society (Weiner, 2005).

Some states, clearly frustrated about the lack of a viable solution have taken matters into their own hands. In 2007 Farmers Branch, Texas sought on the basis of a public vote to ban undocumented immigrants from renting apartments. This is in violation of the authority of the Federal Government, since only the latter has a right to oversee and implement such decisions. Ultimately, the decision was challenged by tenants in the District Courts. Similarly City Council in Escondido, California chose to allow any resident to file a complaint if he or she had reason to believe that another resident was an illegal immigrant- and property owners had 10 days to evict such tenants or prove otherwise. This was challenged by the ACLU claiming lack of due

process and discrimination. It was also thrown out by the judge who doubted that it would pass legal scrutiny. Even the IIRA has been challenged by the District Council of the State of Pennsylvania. In all these cases, it has been proven that the effect would not only be discriminatory but also a violation of Due Process and the Fourteenth Amendment. On the other hand it would also be difficult for the landlords to prove the status of their tenants in the absence of proper guidelines. Only the U.S. Department of Immigration and Naturalization has the authority to determine the eligibility of anyone as to whether he or she is a legal or illegal alien. The predominance of state over federal laws would have every state enacting and enforcing its own laws, while what is needed here is a uniform immigration policy (Thomas, 2007, 103-121).

In the first quarter of 2011, as many as 1500 bills were routed to Congress to take action on the immigration problem. It's finally gotten to the point where states insist that the government take some action. However, recent polls show that people are divided on which aspect of the problem to tackle first- the illegal immigrants that are already on our shores or preventing a further influx. A May 2010 USA Today/ Gallup poll showed that 43 percent of U.S. adults preferred that the government should deal with the 12 million illegal immigrants already in the USA while 57 percent of them advocated that it would be better to halt further illegal immigration (Ginn, 2011, 28-31). Some states such as Maryland have begun to charge out of state tuition fee from illegal immigrants while South Carolina expressly prohibits illegal immigrants from joining colleges and universities and gaining from state sponsored education. Quite clearly as the legislators see it, states can enact such restrictions if it does not conflict with federal laws.

The reform of immigration laws is imperative from the point of view of national security and social justice. The country's vulnerability to the effects of terrorism has directed public attention to the danger of foreigners who have entered the country to evade immigration controls. There are fears within the territory of a number of individuals who coordinate and conduct further terrorist actions, and whose presence goes unnoticed because of their irregular status. However, to date there has been no evidence to show that Hispanic workers entering U.S. territory have links with any terrorist groups that threaten national security. Unfortunately, on the border with Mexico drug mafias operate with relative ease and control the flow of the drug trade, which is also considered a major threat to this society.

But despite all the reasons expressed against unauthorized immigration, it is clear that U.S. citizens have always felt proud to belong to a culture which respects individual rights and where universal justice is exercised. According to President Obama, it is time to make immigration laws more humane. President Bush recognized that, regardless of their immigration status, millions of workers actively contributed to the growth of this country. Therefore, they were entitled to fair wages, health care and social security. Advocates for immigration reform by President Obama also stress that a globalized economy depends on the free movement of goods and people.

It is obvious that in a globalized world, geographic borders are becoming less relevant. However, this does not mean that nations should lose their sovereignty and that governments should waive the right to protect the interests of their citizens. The United States, like any other country has the inalienable right to take the measures necessary to protect its territory and security of its citizens. Conduct of migration control

is one of them. Meanwhile, those who choose to live in this country are obliged to accept its precepts and laws.

There is no doubt that the immigration debate is fueled by the deep concerns of many people who approach them from the perspective of their needs or fears. In this permanent conflict of interest is impossible to determine who is part of the conflict or who is not. What is clear is that there is no ideal solution that reconciles the interests of many individuals at the same time. Similarly, it is clear that arrogant or belligerent attitudes are doomed to failure, for any reasonable solution involves compromise. Given the vast extent of illegal immigration, it is impossible to imagine being able to carry out the expulsion of millions of workers and their families, nor to seal the borders. Even more absurd is the idea of incarceration of millions. It will be difficult to find solutions to the immigration problem to ignore this overwhelming reality (Espenshade,1995).

Meanwhile, Hispanics must adopt sensible attitudes at the time of claiming their rights. Any request made by taking an aggressive stance has little chance of success. The use of open confrontation will not awaken empathy for the problems of the undocumented. In fact there is a risk of increasing feelings of rejection towards the community, as has happened with protests and street demonstrations. Accustomed to being ignored by their governments and their societies, many Latinos claim their rights in this country with loud voices. It is necessary that undocumented workers have wise leaders to guide them in the process of achieving the desired rights by way of dialogue and justice. On the other hand, it should also be emphasized the enormous benefits that many Latin American countries gain from the work of their emigrants.

Finally, people involved in the immigration debate should be aware that the economic stability of this country is directly related to the stability of neighboring countries. To a large extent the social balance of several Latin American countries depends on the wages of illegal immigrants, who send about \$30 trillion to their countries of origin. These funds make possible the survival of large populations. Mexico, for example, has this capital as one of the three pillars of the national economy. The cessation of the flow of remittances could result in a serious economic crisis, which could lead to social unrest and popular uprisings in the neighboring countries. A conflict in Mexico would have a negative impact on this country, as happened with the Mexican Revolution a century ago. There is no doubt that the destinies of the United States and other nations of Latin America are interconnected in many ways.

From the foregoing analysis, it is clear that the immigration problem cannot be solved only within the borders of this country. Unless we promote development and social stability in the continent's poor countries, they would continue to export its citizens to those places where they find sources of work and wealth. While some might argue that deterrence and prevention is a better way to deal with the issue, the economic approach is clearly a longer term solution. Given the enormous impact of immigration in the nation, it is imperative to generate policies for joint cooperation between the United States and other nations of the continent. It is likely that in this process of mutual support, solidarity is more effective than any measure of force.

The recent downturn in the economy has not weakened the case for a comprehensive reform but has the potential to strengthen the case for it. The problem will not go away unless it is properly addressed. Recent opinion polls show that 47

percent of voters believe that solving the issue of immigration should be a high priority for Congress. Further, as many as 80 percent of swing voters say that illegal immigration is a serious problem and a little more than half or 57 percent of swing voters believe that immigration reform was not discussed enough during the last elections.

Privately conducted polls showed that two thirds of voters believe immigrants who are not here legally should become legal taxpayers and pay their fair share. It is being argued that candidates who will offer solutions to this problem will find that is an advantage - not despite the economy but because of it. Citizens do not want their jobs to be sourced overseas or taken up by lowly paid illegal immigrants- rather they want them to stay in the U.S. and be available to the U.S. workers (Hira & Hira, 2005). In any event, it is clear that the immigration problem has many dimensions that need to be addressed if we are to arrive at any consensus at all.

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