

An open letter to GOP leadership on immigration

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The recent Texas legislative session should provide a sensible lesson for those who support Arizona-like immigration laws for our state. Despite strong political pressure from the governor's office and elsewhere for anti-sanctuary city legislation, nothing passed. The Legislature also declined to enhance penalties against employers who hire undocumented workers. In the aftermath, Texas can continue its proud tradition of tolerance that was exemplified in 1996 when then-Gov. George W. Bush welcomed GOP primary candidates to Texas as long as they didn't bash immigrants.

But that doesn't mean that something doesn't need to be done to enact sensible immigration reform to protect our border with Mexico, the longest of any U.S. state. Now is the time for our Texas Republican congressional leadership to work with their Democratic colleagues to take genuine leadership on immigration. A lot is at stake for Texas, which has grown in recent years mostly through immigration, both legal and illegal.

The ingredients are there. Our Texas delegation holds important positions in the federal immigration debate. U.S. Sen. John Cornyn is the ranking Republican on the immigration subcommittee in the Senate. U.S. Rep. Lamar Smith, R-San Antonio, chairs the House Judiciary Committee. U.S. Reps. Sheila Jackson Lee, D-Houston, and Ted Poe, R-Houston, serve on the House Immigration Subcommittee.

They should develop a Texas approach — not a Democratic or Republican solution - to resolve this immigration issue once and for all. That is in the best interests of the nation and the state. And it is in the best long-term interests of Texas Republicans if they hope to thrive after Texas becomes a majority Hispanic state. By agreeing to develop a pragmatic immigration approach, the GOP leadership maintains ties with Hispanic-American voters who are socially conservative rather than alienate them with anti-immigrant rhetoric.

The failure of the GOP-dominated Texas Legislature to enact a single anti-immigrant bill should be a powerful signal to our federal officials. They should pick up the challenge to deal with immigration reform at a federal level - where it belongs. This was the precise position taken during the legislative session by Metro 8, the eight chambers of commerce of the largest cities in Texas, including the Greater Houston Partnership.

Of course, President Obama can be criticized for not pushing immigration reform before health care and financial reform during his first two years in the White House, when Democrats controlled both houses of Congress. But it is equally clear that, given the majority Republican

control of the House and their numbers in the Senate, the president cannot pass balanced immigration reform without strong Republican support. And that's the way it should be.

The highest hurdle facing Congress, and particularly the Republican majority, will be coming up with a system that takes into account the estimated 10.8 million undocumented aliens in the United States. Ultimately, there can be a reasonable solution without providing blanket amnesty or attempting the impossible task of returning undocumented workers to their homelands. But it's important that the debate not get caught up in false rhetoric. Today, we have the most secure southern and northern borders in our nation's history, with the lowest levels of illegal entries in decades. Border violence in the United States is remarkably low given the truly horrible levels of violence in Mexico for the past decade.

Furthermore, we should recognize that true border security will be far more effective by enacting immigration reform to establish: (1) a forgery-proof Social Security card to establish work eligibility, which would greatly discourage illegal immigration if jobs were not available; and (2) a viable temporary worker program for skilled and semi-skilled workers where there is proof of a U.S. labor shortage. Under current law, there are few viable options for those seeking to work here legally except for professionals.

At the very least, our Republican leadership should take the lead to enact the DREAM Act as a small down payment for sensible immigration reform to provide a legal option for college students and those willing to serve in the U.S. military to apply for temporary legal status. Under current law, children brought here through no fault of their own, who often discover they do not have a legal status in the United States only when they apply for a driver's license or passport, have no basis to ever qualify for a legal status. Despite inflammatory and highly distorted information spewed by talk television and radio commentators, the DREAM Act is supported by business organizations, college presidents, religious leaders, trade unions and the military.

The lesson of the 2011 Texas Legislature is clear - no harm was done and our state avoided a terrible step backwards. Now it's up to our delegation in Washington as Texans - not just Republicans or Democrats - to step into the future on an issue that affects all of us.

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