



Businesses Want Clarity from Immigration Reform

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There's the historical element to immigration -- the United States is, after all, a country founded and built by immigrants.

There's also the political element. The recent presidential election was decided in large part by the so-called immigrant vote, primarily made up of Hispanics and Asians whose growing political influence will only get stronger in the future.

Then there's the economic element. Consider that by 2015, Hispanic buying power in the U.S. is expected to hit a whopping \$1.5 trillion, a 50% increase above 2010. Asian buying power, meanwhile, is expected to jump to \$750 billion, a 40% increase from 2010.

The statistics don't stop there. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, by 2050 the Hispanic population in the U.S. will increase by 167%; the Asian population by 142%.

For these latter reasons American businesses are almost uniformly in support of immigration reform that will once-and-for-all clarify who does and who doesn't belong in the U.S. Employers are eager to save time and money secure in the knowledge that all of their employees are legally eligible to work here.

"I'm hopeful the current vision realizes that immigration is an asset to this country not only economically but morally and historically as well," said Ignacio Donoso, a partner at immigration law firm FosterQuan, LLP.

A bipartisan group of U.S. Senators is promoting a broad immigration reform package that attempts to solve two of the primary concerns related to immigration: what to do with the estimated 11 million undocumented workers currently living in the U.S., and how to reduce the traffic of immigrants coming into the country illegally.

The Senate plan would make it easier for undocumented workers to get their documents and eventually gain citizenship, while at the same time beefing up security along U.S. borders.

President Obama is scheduled to announce his own proposal later Tuesday, a plan that reportedly leans further in the direction of easing the path to citizenship for undocumented workers and less on tougher security measures. Obama has made it clear that immigration reform will be a top priority of his second term.

Employers Support Reform

Employers roundly support the reform efforts and hope the momentum in Washington, D.C., for legislative action can be maintained.

The president pushed immigration reform in 2010 but the effort -- like all recent efforts -- stalled amid partisan squabbling. The business community hopes this time is different.

“It’s been a years-long endeavor by employers large and small to audit their workforce in an effort to determine who’s legal and who isn’t. It’s never 100% certain and they’re never entirely in compliance,” said Donoso.

The “key” to any successful reform proposal will be providing as much clarity as possible to employers to eliminate that uncertainty, the immigration lawyer said.

Existing methods for employee verification of their workers’ legal status are outdated and ineffective, according to Donoso, a problem that’s grown more acute in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. After the attacks immigration authorities tightened their focus on undocumented workers living in the U.S.

The added scrutiny has raised costs for U.S. employers, especially in industries widely recognized for non-compliance: the restaurant and hotel industries, for instance, and the vast agricultural sector.

Donoso said business owners are also clamoring for a streamlined process for obtaining temporary work visas so that talented foreign workers can come to the U.S. and help out on a short-term basis.

In sum, immigration policy should “attract rather than repel” potential employers and employees, said Donoso.

“The whole issue needs to be tackled within the context of competitiveness,” said Travis Tullos, a regional economist and chairman of the economic analysis panel of the San Antonio Chamber of Commerce.

Tullos described most business owners as “pragmatic,” primarily interested in doing what’s necessary to remain competitive. He spoke anecdotally of a tree trimming service he used recently whose owner told Tullos he was willing to use undocumented workers if they proved both capable and affordable.

Immigrants 30% More Likely to Open New Business

The business owner told Tullos it's not easy to find American workers who will climb trees for \$11 or \$12 an hour. So he's forced to use undocumented workers.

Still, Tullos warned it will be costly to beef up security along the borders and to verify millions of undocumented workers and then remove those found to be in the U.S. illegally. "Is this what we want the government to be spending our tax dollars on?" he asked.

Adriana Kugler, a professor of public policy at Georgetown University and a former chief economist in the Obama administration's Labor Department, reeled off statistic after statistic that support easing the path to citizenship for undocumented workers.

For example, immigrants are 30% more likely to open new businesses than Americans already living here, she said. Restaurants, delis, fast food franchises and the like. That creates jobs.

In addition, immigrants who become documented workers see their purchasing power rise on average by 14%, according to Kugler.

"Immigrants are also consumers," she said. "Consumption and spending are key to the economic revival and once (undocumented workers) become documented their purchasing power rises accordingly."

Documented workers are also required to pay taxes, Kugler noted, another benefit to easing the path to citizenship for those 11 million undocumented workers living in the U.S.

"Immigrants are already contributing and they'll contribute even more when they're documented. People haven't recognized the benefits of immigrants -- they've focused instead on the costs," said Kugler. "We need to do this. It's long overdue."

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