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A Republican Case for Immigration Reform

While the Senate bill can be improved, it would welcome more skilled workers and lead to faster economic growth.

By JEB BUSH AND CLINT BOLICK

Now that the Senate has passed comprehensive immigration reform, the action shifts to the House of Representatives. Here the GOP's informal "Hastert Rule" requires Speaker [John Boehner](#) to have majority support among Republicans before he will bring legislation to the floor for a vote. That means an immigration bill will need a far greater share of Republican House members than the Senate version received (where fewer than one-third of Republicans voted "aye").

This is a tall order. But it is one to which House Republicans should respond.

No Republican would vote for legislation that stifled economic growth, promoted illegal immigration, added to the welfare rolls, and failed to ensure a secure border. Yet they essentially will do just that if they fail to pass comprehensive immigration reform—and leave in place a system that does all of those things.

To grow economically, the nation needs more young workers, as the population is aging and its growth is slowing. Yet only 13% of the immigration visas each year are issued for work or special skills. Nearly two-thirds go to relatives of existing residents, under an expansive definition of family preferences that includes not just spouses and minor children but parents, siblings and unmarried adult children.

Family preferences crowd out the work-based immigration this country needs. In particular, America's educational system produces only a fraction of the high-skilled workers required for technology jobs.

U.S. universities still attract the world's best and brightest, but few foreign students are allowed to remain after graduating. Many return home or go on to other countries with more sensible immigration policies. Canada has one-tenth of our population—yet it issues far more high-skilled visas (more than 150,000) yearly than we do (65,000).

Illegal immigration results now because there are too few lawful low-skill job opportunities for immigrants. But in both high- and low-skilled industries, the actual alternative to importing workers is not hiring more Americans but exporting jobs.

Today, working-age immigrants contribute to the economy and more to social services than they consume. America needs more of them. Doubling GDP growth to 4% from the anemic 2% that has become the new normal would create more than \$4 trillion in additional economic activity in the 10th year—more than the entire current GDP of Germany. It would also add \$1 trillion in recurring tax revenues.

The Senate immigration reform addresses most of the flaws of the current system. It reduces family preferences, increases the number of high-skilled visas, expands guest-worker programs, and creates a merit-based immigration system for people who want to pursue the American dream. It also offers a path to citizenship for those who were brought here illegally as children, and dramatically increases resources and tools for border security.

The bill also invites people who came here illegally to come out of the shadows through a provisional resident status. It does not provide an amnesty, that is, a pardon. The Senate bill creates a 13-year probation during which those who came illegally must pay a series of fines and back taxes, undergo background checks, are ineligible for most social services, and must work continuously.

Overall, the bill satisfies a criterion that is essential to the rule of law: It makes it easier to immigrate legally than illegally.

The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office projects that the Senate bill would reduce the budget deficit by more than \$1 trillion over 20 years, boost the economy and increase productivity, without reducing the wages of U.S. workers. In short, it advances Republican economic growth objectives.

Still, the House can make several important improvements. These include clearer and more objective border security "triggers" to assure that the flow of illegal immigrants has been curbed, and a stronger E-Verify system to ensure that only people who are here legally are working. The House also can create more opportunities for work-based immigration by limiting family preferences to spouses and minor children, as most other countries do.

Importantly, the House can increase the artificially low guest-worker numbers included at the behest of labor unions in the Senate bill. The best antidote to illegal immigration in the future is a functioning system that allows workers to come and go legally.

Moreover, the House should beef up civics education requirements for new citizens. Currently, immigrants need answer only six of 10 civics questions correctly to qualify. New citizens should be required not only to learn English but to fully understand the nature and workings of our democratic and free-enterprise systems.

The necessary overhaul of the immigration system cannot be achieved piecemeal. The most important changes—reducing family preferences, creating a robust guest-worker program, and increasing border security—cannot be enacted with Republican votes alone. That means compromise and a comprehensive approach—or the perpetuation of the status quo that has all of the detriments of amnesty without any of the economic benefits of reform.

Such reform is commended by both sound policy and principle. And it will also earn goodwill among citizens of Hispanic and Asian descent. In the 2012 presidential election, Republicans received only 27% of Hispanic votes—down from 40% only 12 years earlier. Fifty thousand Hispanics turn 18 and become eligible to vote every month. Republicans did even worse among Asians—now the largest group of immigrants every year—receiving only 26% of their votes.

Immigration is not the only issue on which Hispanics or Asians vote. But it is a gateway issue. Republicans have much in common with immigrants—beliefs in hard work, enterprise, family, education, patriotism and faith. But for their voice to penetrate the gateway, Republicans need to cease being the obstacle to immigration reform and instead point the way toward the solution.

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