



CONSERVATIVES: WE MUST BAND TOGETHER ON IMMIGRATION BILL

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The choice we face on immigration isn't between the Senate bill and perfection; it's between the Senate bill and the unacceptable status quo.

This is the most far-reaching and thoughtful reform of our immigration system in four decades and one that will significantly enhance American competitiveness. As with any political compromise, improvements can be made. But the basic framework is one that conservatives should support. Indeed, for conservatives who opposed last year's immigration bill, this package represents a step forward.

The immigration system is in desperate need of repair. Any attempt to fix it must start with three givens: the need to regain control of our borders, the need to deal rationally with 12 million illegal immigrants already playing an integral role in our economy, and the need to restructure our immigration system so that we maintain our competitive strength in the global economy.

The Senate package addresses all three needs in a manner that advances conservative values.

It will make America safer and restore the rule of law. Indeed, it will make sure that the law is enforced first, before any other provisions of the legislation take effect. A key improvement over last year's bill, the package is built around a set of enforcement benchmarks that must be met before a single guest worker is hired or illegal immigrant legalized.

The border enforcement triggers include over 500 miles of fencing and vehicle barriers plus more than double the number of Border Patrol agents, for a total of 20,000.

The critical trigger in the workplace is establishing a mandatory electronic employment verification system that will confirm that employees are who they say they are and are authorized to work in the U.S. Within a few years, not just new but existing employees will have to be verified. And penalties for employers who hire illegal workers will quadruple.

Second, the package deals realistically — sternly but pragmatically — with the illegal immigrants already here. These workers will have to come forward and acknowledge having broken the law. They will be required to pay a \$1,000 fine and additional fees of up to \$2,000 to pay for the local government services they and their families consume. Applicants will have to prove they are employed and pass a criminal background check. In order to renew their visas, they will be required to take an English and American civics test. And they will be ineligible for welfare, Social Security and food stamps.

Is this amnesty? We don't think so. And surely it is in America's interest to know these workers' real names, vet their backgrounds and get them paying their full freight in taxes.

Eventually, once the current backlog of legal applicants is cleared, these newly registered workers will have an opportunity to earn citizenship. But this will take at least 13 years and another \$4,000 fine. Heads of households will have to return to their home countries to apply.

Finally, the package will make America more competitive. Unlike the current system, which gives strong preference to extended family members, the bill bases future admissions on America's national interests. The package will create two entirely new streams of foreign workers, one temporary, one permanent. The flexible temporary worker program will ensure that we meet our short-term labor needs, contributing to continued economic growth by filling jobs American workers are not filling. But it will indeed be temporary, with strong incentives for workers to go home at the end of their work stints. And permanent visas will be based on merit — the applicant's skills, education, command of English and employment potential.

Border security, the rule of law, national interest, economic competitiveness — these are the conservative concerns at the heart of the agreement. Yet conservatism is also, as Ronald Reagan reminded us, about optimism and self-confidence — about an America sure enough of itself to be a big tent and a beacon.

The Senate framework will allow us to go on attracting immigrants and maintain the rule of law, too. The benefits of the bill far outweigh its shortcomings. We believe it offers the only realistic way forward, and urge conservatives — and all Americans — to embrace the promise it holds out.

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