

Commentary

Good First Move, Obama

Tamar Jacoby

May 16, 2009

Just when it seemed that President Barack Obama had taken on every controversial issue he could possibly take on, thrilling or alienating as many Americans as he could possibly thrill or alienate, he moved last week to widen the circle further. He added immigration policy to his to-do list.

It's an important first step to get the issue on the agenda.

There's never a good time to tackle immigration, and the recession does not help. Soaring unemployment makes it hard for Americans to think rationally about foreign workers, even if the truth is we still need them. The president himself has made clear he doesn't expect Congress to touch the issue till after it has grappled with the problems already on its plate, including the economy and health-care reform.



Still, the White House recognizes, it can't ignore immigration, and not just because Democrats want to deliver for Latino voters. The issue has and will come up in every other major policy debate this year. From the stimulus package to the budget, from health care to education reform, all these initiatives have ramifications for the 12 million foreigners living in the country illegally.



And the president's own rhetoric puts him under enormous pressure: An administration that has promised to put the nation's house in order by tackling even the thorniest issues neglected by previous presidents and do-nothing Congresses can't fix all those other systemic failures and ignore this one.

The question, of course, is how, and the White House has said virtually nothing about what its approach will be. The temptation will be to play to the base with a reform package couched in progressive rhetoric that pleases Democratic constituencies (or voters Democrats would like as their constituents), labor unions and Latino voters. Labor – the AFL-CIO and the Change to Win federations – made its demands clear for a bill this week: demands strongly at odds with business interests. But on immigration, unlike some other issues, this kind of partisanship won't work, practically or politically.

Today, as in the past, Democrats alone don't have the votes to overhaul the immigration system. Even with enhanced majorities in Congress, there are Democrats who can't support reform, who feel that doing so would cost them their seats. Tempting as it will be to frame the debate as compassionate, pro-Latino Democrats vs. bigoted Republicans, that won't put a bill over the finish line.

The same is true with policy: Only a truly bipartisan approach will get the job done.

Most lawmakers who are serious about fixing the system, Democrat or Republican, agree: Deporting 12 million illegal immigrants is impossible, and what immigration skeptics call "attrition through enforcement" hasn't worked. We need a tough but fair legalization policy that brings immigrants too rooted to leave the country into the system, paying their fair share of taxes and assimilating into American life.

Where the left and right reformers start to diverge is in the way they talk about the elements needed in a reform package. Is legalization a "civil rights issue" or a matter of restoring the rule of a law, an earned restitution necessary for American economic and security interests? So too with enforcement: Is it something to be endured (the unavoidable but unwelcome price of legalization), or is it an essential piece of any effective overhaul?

But the sharpest and most important difference dividing left and right reformers isn't about rhetoric. It's about whether the overhaul should enlarge the pipeline through which foreigners can enter the country legally to work in the U.S. The AFL says it can't accept a new temporary worker program. Employers in industries that rely on immigrant workers say they can't sustain their businesses without one. Straddlers talk about kicking the question down the road by passing legalization plus enhanced enforcement now and leaving the problem of future labor needs until after the recession. Labor's idea of a compromise: abolish even existing temporary worker programs and create a commission of supposedly neutral scholars and bureaucrats to determine future labor needs and immigration quotas.

The problem with all of this is it ignores what drives modern immigration in the first place and what makes it beneficial for Americans: market forces. Demographic changes in the U.S. – declining fertility, baby-boom retirement, increasing educational attainment – leave many employers at both the top and the bottom of the economy without the workers they need, even in a recession. (Not even unemployed Americans seem to want to work on farms or take seasonal jobs, and foreigners still account for two-thirds of the students in U.S. university science and engineering programs.) Increasingly integrated global labor markets help American businesses meet these workforce needs. Because the foreigners who come seeking jobs are different from most Americans, either more or less educated, they complement rather than compete with us and as a result help grow the economy, increase our productivity and raise – rather than lower – most U.S. wages.

The only question for policy makers is whether to fight this global economic dynamism with unrealistically low immigration quotas or channel it with programs that allow needed workers to enter the country legally. Without an adequate pipeline for workers, there can be no hope of enforcing any new immigration law. Like Prohibition or a 500-calorie-a-day diet, unrealistic quotas will soon be overrun. To the degree they stick, they will choke economic recovery; it's hard to grow a business or the economy without an adequate labor supply. And the consequence, as in 1986, will be another immigration overhaul not worth the paper on which it's written.

As for creating a commission to gauge future labor needs and set quotas, certainly it makes sense to try to take the politics out of immigration policy. Congress does a miserable job of

it. But imagine what a commission would have said in 1980, before the housing boom, about the future need for construction works – or, for that matter, what it would have said six months before the housing bust. Whatever members' politics – and it's hard to imagine a body truly insulated from political influence – the commission would have been dead wrong in either year, with disastrous consequences for the economy.

The bottom line: It's not going to be easy, despite larger pro-immigrant Democratic majorities in Congress, to thread the needle on immigration policy. On the contrary, undivided Democratic rule may make it harder: harder to see what's needed as policy and harder to compromise on a consensus package. Whether Congress gets to the issue this fall, next spring or later in the Obama years, it's going to be a test for both Democrats and Republicans. The president has landed a good first shot. Now comes the hard part: crafting a balanced policy that works for all Americans.

Tamar Jacoby is president of ImmigrationWorks USA, a national federation of employers advocating immigration reform.

<http://www.forbes.com/2009/04/16/immigration-policy-reform-opinions-contributors-obama.html>