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## EDITORIAL: IMMIGRATION BREAKOUT

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President Obama's State of the Union address Tuesday night got the headlines, but few of his proposals will pass and most would make inequality worse by hurting economic growth. The bigger news this week turns out to be in Congress, where House Republicans seem poised for a political breakout on immigration.

Speaker John Boehner plans to unveil a general set of immigration reform principles when the House GOP holds its annual retreat Thursday. Some on the right are trying to scare House Republicans into ducking back into their Mitt Romney self-deportation crouch. So it's worth taking a step back to explain why Republicans should move forward for the good of the country and future of the GOP.

The most important reason to reform immigration laws is to promote economic growth and prosperity. The U.S. has long had a generous immigration system, but it has been skewed to family unification rather than U.S. economic interests. A smarter immigration system would follow the model of Canada and put a higher priority on keeping the best and brightest.

In today's global economy, with many rising nations, the U.S. is in an increasingly competitive contest for human capital. Yet often today the U.S. educates talented foreigners in our schools only to deny them visas to stay and work in America. The companies they create will be in China and India rather than Austin or Minneapolis. This is why the Senate bill wisely opens the gates wider for foreign graduates and high-tech (H1-B) visas.

The same principle applies to lower-skilled workers who can help fill the labor shortages in many parts of the country. Agriculture is among the worst off, and millions of crop acres go fallow or are left to rot due to too few farm workers. The current farm-visa program is such a bureaucratic morass that almost nobody uses it, and the gap is filled with workers who have fake documents.

Some on the right claim these workers take jobs away from Americans, but only union leaders and Beltway intellectuals could believe this. Ask the employers who have to struggle to find workers for their restaurants, hotels, construction sites or meat processing plants. These jobs won't go at higher pay to American workers. They will head overseas, as much farm production already has, or they will vanish as some services are priced out of business.

A generous guest-worker program that allowed immigration to meet economic demand is also the only effective way to reduce illegal immigration. Fences and drones may reduce border traffic, but they won't stop those who overstay their visas and already represent an estimated 40 percent of those here illegally.

The main conservative talking point against reform continues to be opposition to a path to citizenship for the 11 million or so illegals already here, aka "amnesty." This is politically dishonest because the current system is a de facto amnesty and any reform would require fines and a long wait for a green card. But the amnesty charge has become a political devil word.

Mr. Boehner wants to break this impasse by having the House GOP endorse legalization without full citizenship. This is not ideal since we shouldn't want a class of permanent residents who aren't invested in the country as citizens. But it is better than the status quo of millions living in the shadows and subject to exploitation. Many immigration activists are willing to go along with this as an alternative to another year of doing nothing, and no doubt Democrats would continue to make full citizenship an issue. As a way to bust the logjam, this ought to be acceptable to Mr. Obama.

As for the partisan politics, after 2012 the GOP's image problems with nonwhite voters are obvious. The nearby table shows the decline in the GOP's presidential share of Asian and Hispanic voters from 2004 to 2012. These voters are going to increase as a share of the electorate even if the U.S. admitted no more immigrants because millions are already here legally. Immigration isn't the only issue they care about, but it has become a threshold concern that has turned them away from the GOP.

The latest argument of the restrictionists is that the GOP shouldn't take on immigration this year when they can unite against ObamaCare and gain seats in November. But for these voices there will never be a good time for immigration, and they'll use the same line next year.

If the GOP wants to become a majority party again – and it isn't now – it needs to address the country's main problems. While immigration isn't near the top of voter concerns today, it has festered for a decade or more and will return until something is done. The smart play for Republicans is to pass reform and take the issue off the table.

The details will matter as the debate progresses, but this new spirit of compromise suggests a reform success is possible even in an election year. With Republicans stepping up to break gridlock, the question becomes whether Mr. Obama wants a bipartisan achievement or merely one more issue to campaign on.