



Will Democrats Use Immigration as Weapon or Try to Pass a Bill?

By Morton M. Kondracke
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There's every reason for Congress to pass comprehensive immigration reform this year. But if it proves politically impossible, Democrats ought to go for a "leaner" bill that can pass. Democrats will be sorely tempted to use failure to pass sweeping reform as a political weapon against Republicans, but they ought to do the right thing and fix as much of a broken system as they can. Specifically, they could take an "Ag-plus" approach, passing legislation to reform immigration in the agricultural sector, help immigrant students go to college, shorten wait times for families and keep highly skilled workers in the U.S.

The reasons for comprehensive reform are practical, political and moral. As Sens. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) and Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) wrote in the Washington Post last month, "Our immigration system is badly broken. "Although our borders have become far more secure in recent years, too many people seeking illegal entry get through. ..." And employers are burdened by a complicated system for verifying workers' immigration status."

That's not all that's wrong. As the Immigration Policy Center put it in a recent paper, "under the existing system people are dying at the border, immigrants are living and working in abject conditions, families trying to reunite legally are separated for many years. ... U.S. workers suffer from the unlevel playing field shared with exploited immigrant workers and law-abiding U.S. employers are in unfair competition with unscrupulous employers who increase profits by hiring cheap and vulnerable labor."

Schumer and Graham are trying to put together a new comprehensive reform package including tougher border security and interior enforcement - requiring everyone to have a tamper-proof biometric Social Security card - while creating a process to admit temporary workers and an "earned legalization" process for illegal immigrants. Politically, there's every reason for both Democrats and Republicans to pass a comprehensive bill this year.

First, as a candidate for president, Barack Obama promised it would be a first-year priority, and Latino groups are angry that he hasn't pushed it. Latinos overwhelmingly supported Obama in 2008 - by 67 percent to 31 percent for Republican Sen. John McCain (Ariz.) - but there's a danger that they won't turn out to vote in 2010 if action isn't taken on immigration reform. Republicans have every incentive to support reform, too. The reason McCain did poorly among Latinos - down from 40 percent support for George W. Bush in 2004 - is that McCain's Republican colleagues defeated a bill he co-sponsored in 2007. Moreover, they did so after right-wing radio talk-show hosts whipped rank-and-file conservatives into a frenzy against "amnesty" for 10 million "illegals" that often sounded anti-Latino.

Every analyst of political demographics agrees that if Republicans don't get right with Latinos, the fastest-growing voter group in the country, they risk long-term minority status. And practically every national poll shows that the public increasingly supports immigration

reform despite the high unemployment rate. And yet it may be impossible to pass comprehensive reform this year. For one thing, Graham is having difficulty finding another Republican to join him in co-sponsoring the Schumer bill.

Some Republicans are scared by the prospect of being assailed by Rush Limbaugh and tea party nativists. Others are caught up in the GOP's post-health care strategy of denying Democrats any further victories in 2010. Democrats may well resort to a cynical political maneuver - push ahead with a comprehensive bill knowing that it can't get 60 votes in the Senate and use failure as a stick to beat the GOP. That might energize Latinos and perhaps hold down anticipated Democratic losses in November - but it would do nothing to repair the nation's immigration system.

The better alternative would be to pass ag-jobs legislation sponsored by Rep. Howard Berman (D-Calif.) and Sens. Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) and Dick Lugar (R-Ind.) offering 1.2 million agricultural workers a path to legal status and opening the way for more temporary workers to harvest crops. They could add the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act, a measure to enable young people brought to America illegally as children to attend college and measures to give green cards to high-skill workers and foreign students who earn advanced degrees in science.

They could also provide federal aid to local communities affected by immigration burdens, stop state and local police from enforcing immigration laws, stiffen penalties for hiring illegal immigrants and reduce the years-long backlogs for family reunification. Comprehensive reform is long overdue, but Democrats should remember that passing something is better than passing nothing. And, if they handle it right, they can get credit for what they do and also blame Republicans for what they can't.