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THE IMMIGRATION REFORM OPPORTUNITY

By Marco Rubio
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Next week, the Senate will begin making changes to and, hopefully, improve the immigration-reform legislation I introduced with several colleagues last month. This part of the process is a chance to fix America's broken immigration system and end today's de facto amnesty for those who live here illegally. It will also show that Washington can work when leaders listen to the American people and invoke their wisdom in debates and legislative work.

In January, I outlined my principles for conservative immigration reform in these pages—principles that guided the drafting of this legislation. These include securing the borders; requiring all employers to verify their workers' eligibility and severely penalizing them if they hire illegal immigrants; cracking down on legal immigrants who overstay visas; and modernizing the legal immigration system to meet America's 21st-century economic needs for both highly skilled talent and guest workers to fill labor shortages.

To deal with the 11 million illegal immigrants who are already here, the Border Security, Economic Opportunity, and Immigration Modernization Act of 2013 recognizes the reality that they are not going home. It offers them an opportunity for legalization and, potentially, permanent residence and citizenship—provided they pay fines, pass background checks, don't receive federal benefits and wait in line behind everybody who followed the rules, among other requirements.

These principles are crucial for solving today's illegal immigration problem and ensuring that it never happens again.

Of course, the details matter. Since my colleagues and I introduced immigration legislation, intense public scrutiny has helped identify shortcomings and unintended consequences that need to be addressed. Many concerned citizens have gone a step further and offered specific ideas to improve it. This kind of constructive criticism is a positive force that should always be welcomed in the political process.

I learned this firsthand when I served as speaker of the Florida House of Representatives. We sought input from Floridians on their most pressing concerns. Their ideas were solicited through events held all over the state called "Idea Raisers" and then compiled in a book, which served as the foundation of our legislative agenda. We took those ideas and turned them into bills, many of which eventually became laws.

That's a good example of how the true wisdom of the nation rests not just with those who serve in our capitals, but with those who live in our communities.

Today's "Idea Raisers" on immigration are happening 24/7—on the Senate floor, in broadcast media, in social media, in the blogosphere and in other ways. It is easier than ever for people to participate in the democratic process.

I've been listening to the voices on these platforms and taking notes about ways to improve the immigration-reform legislation. When I invited public input on my official website, some very good suggestions poured in there, too, that are likely to prove helpful.

For those who have suggested that the border security triggers outlined in the Senate bill aren't strong enough, we now have a chance to strengthen them. For those who expressed concerns about giving the federal government too much discretionary power through waivers and exceptions in applying different aspects of the law, we have a chance to make clear exactly how the executive branch must enforce this immigration law and what the consequences are if it doesn't. For those concerned about the cost of immigration to American taxpayers, we have a chance to make sure the bill lives up to its promise that today's illegal immigrants are not eligible for federal benefits.

And for those who believe the road ahead for illegal immigrants is too generous or lenient, Congress will have a chance to make it tougher, yet still realistic. No one has a right to violate the immigration laws and remain here with impunity. Finding a sensible way to resolve our illegal-immigration problem must include penalties that show the rest of the world that it really is cheaper, easier and faster to immigrate to the U.S. the right way.

Of course, there are those who will never support immigration reform no matter what changes we make. Even if we address every concern they raise, they will likely come up with new ones. They have a long list of complaints but typically never offer a solution of their own.

There are also far-left activist groups that see citizenship for illegal immigrants as a "civil right" and will push to water down border security and enforcement measures that are critical to reform's long-term success. These groups view immigration reform as something that should quickly legalize as many people as possible. That idea—which is manifest throughout the current administration—has done more to poison the well of immigration reform than anything that restrictionist groups could ever manage on their own.

Nonetheless, the overwhelming majority of Americans understand that the status quo on immigration is unacceptable. They support modernizing the legal immigration system and accommodating those who are now in the U.S. illegally, but only if we secure the border and make sure that another wave of illegal immigration doesn't happen.

That is why I remain committed to getting this done. I ran for office because I want to solve problems, and America has a very serious immigration problem. I took on this difficult issue, despite the political risk it entails, because fixing immigration is essential for the nation's security, is good for job creation and has always helped separate America from the rest of the world. What we have now is a disaster. It threatens our security, sovereignty and economy.

Conservatives aren't anti-immigrant—conservatives are pro-legal immigration. What the American people deserve are reforms that make sure the laws are enforced and ensure that the country doesn't face this problem again. Conservatism has always been about reforming government and solving problems, and that's why the conservative movement should lead on immigration reform.

The immigration-reform bill in the Senate is a solid starting point for solving this problem, and I believe it can be made even better as Congress begins to actively work on it in committee next week. But defeating it without offering an alternative cannot be the conservative position on immigration reform. That would leave the issue entirely in the hands of President Obama and leave in place the disastrous status quo.

Mr. Rubio, a Republican, is a U.S. senator from Florida.