

## When recession trumps reform

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With the nation mired in the deepest recession in generations, the economics of immigration are shifting as much as the politics. Proponents and opponents of overhauling immigration laws agree that as long as the jobless rate is on the rise, public opposition to legislation granting some sort of legal status to currently illegal workers – including citizenship – is likely to rise, too.

“When unemployment is up, anything that looks like you’re taking jobs away from people who are lawfully here – citizens of the United States – is going to meet a lot of resistance,” Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano told reporters recently.

With the jobless rate at a 25-year high of 8.9 percent in April and possibly headed to 10 percent, those who intend to fight legalization are preparing to tap into this wellspring of financial insecurity to mobilize grass-roots opposition.

“In June of ‘07, we had a very strong economy, and the American public exploded at the idea of a Bush-McCain amnesty,” said Roy Beck, executive director of NumbersUSA, a group that promotes stronger immigration enforcement efforts. “Now we’ve got 13 million unemployed Americans. The explosion is bound to be far greater.”

### **Unemployment Fears**

Of the roughly 12 million illegal immigrants now in the United States, about 8.3 million are workers, according to an estimate from the Pew Hispanic Center. Debate has raged for decades over whether they take jobs that would otherwise be held by U.S. citizens.

Proponents of legalization say undocumented workers – about 5.4 percent of the total labor force – are concentrated in low-paid, high-mobility industries where labor shortages are common. Former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan argued at a recent congressional hearing that the undocumented workforce functions as a “safety valve” that provides extra labor when needed and is the first to be let go when demand for labor slackens. As a result, he said, illegal immigration “has made a significant contribution to the growth of our economy.”

Advocates for comprehensive immigration overhaul, which would be likely to include both new enforcement tools and a means for some undocumented immigrants to stay in the country legally, say that’s held true even during the current recession. A recent report from the Immigration Policy Center, which supports a comprehensive overhaul, found little correlation between regional jobless rates and the number of newly arrived immigrants.

Meanwhile, among legal and illegal immigrants, unemployment is already about a percentage point higher than it is for the native-born.

“On the one hand, the job market is going to make it easy for people to demagogue and make it hard for some people to accept the notion of giving all of these workers legal status,” said Ross Eisenbrey, vice president of the Economic Policy Institute, a liberal-leaning think tank. “But on the other hand, they’re here. Most of them are probably employed. Whatever effect they’re having, they’re already having.”

But perception can be more important than fact, and polls show that many Americans believe good jobs are going to people who are in the country illegally. Opponents of legalization are hammering home that message: Beck calls comprehensive immigration reform “a cover-up phrase for allowing 7 million illegal foreign workers to permanently keep U.S. jobs and for importing millions more foreign workers each decade.”

### **Illegal Immigration Slows**

Even as the recession has heightened the rhetoric surrounding immigration, the global economic slump is lowering the numbers.

The flow of immigrants across the American border has slowed as jobs in the United States have dried up, even for those willing to work for less than minimum wage.

Census data from the Mexican government found that the number of Mexicans leaving that country dropped by about 25 percent between August 2007 and August 2008. That’s particularly significant because about 60 percent of undocumented immigrants in the United States are estimated to be Mexican. Between October 2008 and May of this year, U.S. Border Patrol arrests fell by 27 percent compared with the same period a year earlier. Remittances – the money that immigrants send to their families back home – also have fallen dramatically.

“The job market is bad, and that’s the main magnet that draws people into the United States, both illegally and legally,” Eisenbrey said.

Still, the effects of the recession on immigration patterns may be limited. Other studies find that immigrants who are already in the United States aren’t leaving in particularly large numbers. And the Mexican economy, where gross domestic product shrank by 8 percent in the first quarter of this year compared with a year ago, is still far worse than the U.S. economy. As one would-be illegal immigrant told a reporter for the Arizona Daily Star: “Part-time work in Chicago is better than no work in Hidalgo.”

Advocates for legalization concede that the best time to work toward an immigration overhaul might be after the economy starts to rebound.

“Once people have a sense that we’re no longer in free fall, I think it makes it much easier to have this debate,” Eisenbrey said.

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