

# Texas on the Potomac

## Inspiring immigration speech. Now what?

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July 1, 2010

President Obama laid out the rationale for reform in eloquent, inspirational terms today. At a time when hope is flagging, he gives new life to the fight for an overhaul.

The best-case scenario: this is a first step in an administration campaign to tee the issue up for consideration by Congress in early 2011.

That's important – we won't get to reform without strong backing from the White House.

But unfortunately the president got several critical things wrong.

For one thing, he didn't mention the element of reform most important to most U.S. employers and the U.S. economy: visas for unskilled non-farm workers to come to the U.S. legally in future years. The economic downturn has done nothing to change the fundamental educational and demographic trends that make foreign workers an essential ingredient of American prosperity. Less-skilled manpower and global talent alike are needed by the American economy even today – and both will play an essential role in the nation's recovery.

Equally troubling, the president is still scolding and blaming Republicans rather than appealing to them in terms that might draw them into a serious effort to compromise on a bill.

The fact is moderate Democrats are just as hesitant as Republicans to take up immigration before the midterm elections – so much so that if comprehensive reform were introduced today, it would not win majority support in either the House or the Senate.

The president got one thing right: what's needed is a balanced, bipartisan compromise that shuns the extreme positions on both sides of the debate. If the White House is serious about moving reform, it needs to start working now to build that centrist consensus.

That means reaching out seriously to Republicans, not shaming them. And it means addressing the 60 percent of Americans who support Arizona's new enforcement law, SB 1070 – listening closely to them and framing reform in terms they can get behind. Today's speech was encouraging for reform advocates, but it won't do much to appeal to Americans who are still skeptical.

If this is indeed the first step in a broader campaign, let's hope the next steps are more truly inclusive – addressing the needs of employers, appealing in a meaningful way to Republicans and repairing, not exacerbating, the divisions created by the Arizona law.