

Opinion

The immigration debate, again

Has the political landscape shifted enough to change the dynamics of immigration reform?

By Tamar Jacoby

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Immigration reform – you may think you’ve seen this movie before, too many times already. You know the arguments. You dread the polarization. And you doubt that Congress can do any better at making the compromises needed to fix the system.

But with the Obama White House rekindling the conversation about immigration, skeptics ought to think again. None of the problems have gone away, after all. Neither the economic downturn nor enhanced enforcement has driven 12 million illegal immigrants to leave the country. Enforcement is still far from effective, either on the border or in the workplace. And even in a recession, we still seem to need foreign workers, especially at the bottom of the economy.

But other things have changed since 2006 and 2007, when the nation last wrangled so bitterly over immigration. And although the new landscape hardly guarantees success – immigration is never an easy issue, and some of what has changed will make it harder to pass reform – it’s going to be a different debate this year.

The most prominent feature of the new landscape is the recession, which at first blush makes reform more difficult. With unemployment still rising, many Americans doubt that we need foreign workers. Voters are thinking about themselves first. They have no patience for other people’s problems. And, as always when times are hard, there’s a danger that populist resentments will curdle into xenophobia, creating pressure to seal the border rather than craft a way for newcomers to come here to work legally.

But so far, the recession isn’t having that effect. Journalists and employers report that not even unemployed Americans seem to want to do farm work or day-labor jobs, at least not yet. Many fewer foreigners are coming to the U.S. in search of work: They know there are fewer jobs available. And the reduced flow seems to be easing American anxieties somewhat.

The difference showed up first in state legislatures, where immigration has been far less of an issue this year than last, perhaps because lawmakers have bigger things to worry about, like balancing their state budgets. And last month, the country’s two big labor federations –

the AFL-CIO and Change to Win – came out strongly in favor of immigration reform, arguing that it would help native-born workers, even in a downturn, by enhancing immigrants’ power to bargain with employers and reducing unfair competition with Americans.

Bottom line: No doubt the recession will color the immigration debate to some degree – but perhaps less than many expect.

The political landscape has also changed. The most obvious and dramatic shift is the new political power of Latinos. According to one estimate, nearly 11 million Latinos voted in 2008, compared with 7.6 million in 2004. They turned at least four states from red to blue.

And there’s no mistaking the new mood: Many Latino voters have come to see immigration as a litmus test. Though not necessarily their first priority, it has become a threshold indicator for judging politicians: “Does he or she like people who look like us, or not?” Democrats have gotten this message loud and clear, and many are embracing immigration reform as a potential wedge issue.

But this attitude could hurt reform as much as it helps. Some Democrats will be afraid to get out ahead of anti-immigrant voters. And those seeking to use immigration for partisan advantage may prefer a long, polarized standoff to a compromise solution. A partisan Democratic push could also harden attitudes among Republicans, and entrenched partisanship on both sides could delay reform for years to come.

New arguments within the immigration reform movement will also complicate the debate this time around. It’s a bigger tent than it used to be – a stronger army fighting for an overhaul. But this also makes it harder for all the troops to agree on what’s needed in a bill.

Advocates on the left now include not just Latino voters and unions (divided in 2006 and 2007, and often an obstacle to reform), but also a growing portion of Obama’s progressive base. Meanwhile, on the center-right, employers who hire immigrants are engaging, finding the courage to speak up about how they need foreign workers.

The problem: Left and right not only frame their arguments differently, they also disagree on matters of substance. Most significantly, unions question whether the country needs reform that creates more visas for immigrant workers to enter the country in the future, while employers who hire foreigners say they can’t sustain their businesses without them.

The question for the months ahead: Will these differences undo the reform movement, or will left and right find ways to compromise, broadening their base and expanding their power?

Here’s the other big question: How strong are the anti-immigrant activists who dominated the debate last time – talk radio and CNN’s Lou Dobbs and their inflamed, angry followers. In fact, as poll after poll showed, these naysayers represented a relatively small segment of Americans – no more than 20% to 25%. But they were loud and well-organized, and they managed to generate doubts about reform among a much larger group of uncertain,

ambivalent voters.

Dobbs and former Colorado congressman Tom Tancredo are already ratcheting up their anti-immigrant rhetoric, and the recession may help them. But it's also possible that things will play out differently, that some of the far-right's anger is spent, and that the doubts won't catch on as they did last time among the broader public. Voters are anxious and self-absorbed, but as Obama's election and continued popularity show, voters want things fixed. They want Washington to act boldly, to tackle hard problems, to make the compromises necessary to pass fundamental reforms. And immigration may well benefit from the new can-do, reformist mood.

Will it be immigration *deja vu* in 2009? It could be – the same old stale debate or an equally uncompromising one. But enough has already changed that it could be different this time around. Who knows, this time, we as a nation might even get to "yes."

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