

# Illegal-immigration temptation

The Monitor's View  
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President Bush may have won at least something in last week's election. A Democratic Congress could lean more closely toward his ideas on dealing with illegal immigration. But before the two now try to look bipartisan and pass something quickly, they should scrutinize the tea leaves in the ballot results.

Mr. Bush was a bit hasty just two days after the election in pledging to Mexico's visiting president-elect, Felipe Calderón, that he'll work harder for his "comprehensive" solution on illegal immigration. The election signals on this issue were mixed.

In many races, illegal migration was a major topic for both parties, and not always a winner. In Pennsylvania, two Democratic challengers won after accusing GOP incumbents of being soft on illegal immigration. A few Republicans who appeared to be not just against illegal migration but anti-immigrant lost seats. One TV ad for losing GOP incumbent Randy Graf in Arizona rattled off crime statistics and criticized an "open door" border policy as it showed a blond child walking toward a door slowly opening.

But also in Mr. Graf's Arizona, the state hit hardest by the rise in illegal migrants, four ballot initiatives that would restrict education and various state services for illegals, and also make English the official state language, won by a nearly 3 to 1 margin.

Those votes aren't anti-legal immigrant or anti-Mexican. They send a message to all elected officials about the dangers of massive illegal migration and the slow pace of assimilation for the illegals who manage to stay in the US.

More than 3 in 5 Americans say the issue of illegal immigrants is either "extremely" or "very" important, according to this election's exit polls. The new Congress will need to separate the urgent need to curb illegal immigration in a post-9/11 world from other immigration concerns, such as providing business with cheap labor.

First off is a need to bring credibility to federal enforcement of laws against hiring illegals and in finding better ways to prevent illegal border crossings. Just before the election, the current Congress strongly voted in a bipartisan way for the idea of a 700-mile border fence with Mexico. But voters had to notice that the bill went unfunded.

And Congress should drop the word "comprehensive," which many use to include the ideas of allowing more Mexicans to work temporarily in the US legally and to make legal the illegal ones already here. The first idea, known as a guest-worker program, won't ever be large enough to meet the desire of nearly half of the Mexican population which wants to come to the US (even the middle class). The second idea, a sort of earned amnesty with penalties, could spur even more illegal migration, as the 1986 amnesty did, without guaranteed tough immigration-law enforcement.

If anything would be "comprehensive" beyond better enforcement at the border and in the workplace, it would be for the US to both assist and encourage reform in Mexico. Large-scale reform of that nation's uneven, slow-growth economy would reduce the desire of its citizens to flee north for a better life.

Bush and the next Congress should provide carrots and sticks in trade and financial policies to help Mexicans love their country more.