

Immigration Advocates Face Challenges

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As anti-immigration sentiment rises, the voices advocating a liberal immigration policy confront new challenges.

The most obvious challenges—including new anti-immigrant legal measures, rising anti-immigrant bias in the media, and an expanding backlash movement against immigration—are not necessarily the most difficult ones.

More daunting are challenges facing pro-immigration groups and immigrant advocates as they seek to establish a framework for discussing immigration.

If immigrant advocates and immigrants themselves are to move from the sidelines to the center of the intensifying immigration debate, and by doing so help staunch the growing influence of the retrograde restrictionist forces, they must meet five major challenges.

The first challenge is to gain credibility as advocates for an immigration policy that considers the totality of U.S. national interests—not just the needs and problems of immigrants or the demands of business for new foreign sources of cheap and skilled labor. Marshalling the same facts and figures used by the *Wall Street Journal* and Corporate America, as pro-immigration advocates often do to describe the net economic benefits of immigration, falls far short of what is needed if immigration reformers are to gain the attention and support of the U.S. public. Macroeconomic figures that show immigrants boosting national economic growth provide little solace to workers who see immigrants holding jobs they or their parents once had, or who find themselves competing in a labor market where immigrant workers are willing to work longer, harder, and for substantially lower wages.

A second, closely related challenge is helping U.S. citizens realize that their communities are communities that include a wide variety of immigrants and that this mix is a healthy one. It's likely that most U.S. citizens already know from personal experience that immigrants play a vital role in their communities, yet restrictionist groups and media personalities have convinced many that immigrants are not only a negative influence but are expendable—that the U.S. government could and should deport 10-11 million illegal residents with no ill effects. Part of the bill of goods that restrictionist voices offer is nostalgia for a society that never existed—one with full employment and where everyone shared the same culture and values.

The challenge, then, is to offer a progressive vision of a healthy, multiethnic, multicultural society. Such a society would collectively move forward with policies to assure full employment, protect labor rights, and provide basic social services to all, without unfairly burdening the middle class, while at the same time facilitating social integration and a sense of community through language instruction and good basic education.

The third challenge that immigration advocates face is overcoming their hesitation to describe the immigration problem as a class problem. The first step in injecting class analysis into their advocacy is to disentangle themselves from business—whether it be Fortune 500 corporations, the National Association of Manufacturers, agribusiness, high-tech firms that increasingly rely on skilled foreign workers, or even the strong lobby of immigration lawyers—which often support liberal immigration policies based on their vested professional interests.

Corporate, pro-immigration positions often coincide with those of immigrants and immigrant advocates. But failing to distinguish between immigration reform motivated by a desire for cheap labor and immigration reform advocated to attain a just society make the entire pro-immigration movement extremely vulnerable to the critique that it is an open borders lobby.

The fourth challenge is one faced by more than just immigrant advocates. It is the challenge of integrating legitimate concerns and demands into a new agenda for national economic development. As it is, U.S. economic development is defined almost exclusively in traditional macroeconomic terms such as rates of economic growth, productivity, inventory levels, retail sales, housing starts, etc.

If pro-immigration advocates are to stem the rising forces of anti-immigrant backlash that are sweeping the United States and gaining momentum throughout the world, they must ally themselves with other policy reformers who are beginning to make the case that development must be redefined to mean full employment, livable wages, an organized workforce, a highly educated society, and environmental protection and restoration. By failing to situate their demands within the context of a new national development policy that is not beholden to narrow business interests, immigrants and immigration advocates risk not only losing the immigration reform debate, but contributing to an ominous economic and political future—one that will likely be characterized by some mixture of harsh restrictionism and a cut-throat national economy where all workers, legal and illegal, compete for jobs that don't offer a living wage or basic benefits.

The fifth main challenge is connecting the dots between immigration policy and foreign policy. In their advocacy and education, anti-immigrant forces don't hesitate to describe the immigration problem as an international one—painting a picture of the United States beset by a non-stop invasion of the world's poor, fleeing war, corrupt governments, and the lack of opportunity at home. The simplicity of their recommended solutions—walling the United States in and deporting all those without residency papers—appeals to those who believe that to retain the present standard of life, this country should be less connected to the rest of the world, creating a Fortress America.

Those who oppose the fear and hate politics coursing through the immigration debate cannot deny the reality that the United States still represents the “land of opportunity” for people of an increasing number of countries. But also true is that most of the would-be emigrants would prefer to live and work in their home countries if economic and social conditions improved.

This challenge, then, is also a challenge for U.S. foreign policy, other industrialized nations, and the international economic institutions—namely to support measures that contribute to broad and sustainable development in Mexico, the Central American nations, and other “sending” countries, rather than economic reforms that obstruct or undermine true development. What needs to be said, loud and clear, is that there is no existing or proposed immigration policy—whether highly restrictive or liberal—that will work, unless it works in conjunction with a foreign policy based on good neighbor principles and a deep appreciation of interconnectedness.

At the same time, though, the burden of addressing the immigration crisis, whether in the United States or any other receiving nation, is first the responsibility of the sending nations. Yes, nations such as Mexico should criticize abusive treatment of their nationals, but such complaints ring hollow if they are not backed by national development policies that aim to keep their own citizens at home rather than policies that directly or indirectly contribute to their expulsion from their homes.

Longer and higher border walls, amnesty, guestworker programs, and proposed earned citizenship programs are all temporary fixes. Immigration policy and border control strategies that ignore the power of the forces of supply and demand while at the same time narrowly framing immigration policy as only a U.S. domestic policy problem are doomed to fail.

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