

ROLL CALL

Immigration Overhaul: Good Ethics and Good Economics | Commentary

By Rep. Frederica S. Wilson, Feb. 26, 2014, 6:06 p.m.

The heart and the head too seldom agree. But there's one issue on the 2014 congressional agenda on which they unquestionably can: Immigration reform is both sound ethics and smart economics.

Start with the moral case for reform. While immigration offenses have historically been dealt with through noncriminal sanctions, the harsh and relentless criminal prosecution of peaceful immigrants has tragically become the norm. A sprawling network of detention centers now holds upward of 400,000 people each year. Most have no criminal history or only minor infractions. Many are kept in solitary confinement. Hundreds of thousands are torn away from their families, causing severe financial hardship and emotional trauma. Passing a reform bill — such as the Senate's bipartisan immigration compromise — would go a long way toward bringing our immigration system up to international human rights standards and toward upholding our nation's own core values.

Passing a comprehensive immigration reform bill would also advance the nation's most pressing bipartisan policy priority: economic recovery.

As UCLA's Raúl Hinojosa-Ojeda has estimated, creating a path to citizenship would increase the nation's gross domestic product by \$1.5 trillion over the coming decade. This means somewhere from 750,000 to 900,000 additional jobs across the country. Just in my home state of Florida, the projected boost from the recent Senate compromise has been estimated at upward of \$55 billion in gross domestic product and tens of thousands of new jobs.

The reasons for this positive economic jolt are simple: Pulling largely underpaid undocumented workers out of the shadows creates positive momentum for all workers' wages. Expanding immigration also means adding know-how in sectors ranging from agriculture to computing. Additional immigration means new sources of customers and new employees for America's businesses, helping to boost consumer demand and production capacity. Expanding the labor supply is particularly important as members of America's largest generation — the baby boomers — begin to retire. Much as we have in the past, we will rely on immigrants to fulfill our national workforce needs and empower our economic growth.

Immigration is not only a win for job creation and economic growth, it's a win for fiscal responsibility. With only a third of undocumented Americans working in the formal economy,

it's estimated that the U.S. loses about \$20 billion just in payroll tax revenue annually. Accounting for all the benefits — from tax collection to increased economic activity — immigration reform could mean up to \$2.7 trillion in deficit reduction over 10 years.

This is not a partisan argument. Top conservative activist Grover Norquist has argued that “in a free economy, people are an asset not a liability.” The libertarian Cato Institute has contended that “legalization of low-skilled immigrant workers would yield significant income gains for American workers and households.” The conservative economist and former director of the Congressional Budget Office Doug Holtz-Eakin has been a key proponent of immigration reform as cost-effective economic stimulus.

As the representative from an immigrant-rich district, this issue is personal for me. At a moral level, I am convinced that there's simply no such thing as an “illegal person.” As the cofounder of Congress' Full Employment Caucus and a persistent advocate for congressional action on jobs, I am convinced that immigration reform is an important vehicle for economic progress.

Both the head and the heart can agree: It's time for the House to pass a comprehensive immigration bill.

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