



Opinion: Immigration reform blueprint focuses on importing skilled labor from places other than Mexico

by Stephen A. Nuño April 16, 2013

It is still not clear what the final immigration bill will look like, but the political ramifications of the bill are beginning to gain clarity for the major political forces involved in the debate over immigration reform. Below is a rundown of the winners and losers, as I see them.

Conservatives are the big losers here, particularly those whose singular interest over the last two decades has been on maintaining the illegal status of those who were here without documentation. It seems as though most of the 11 million will get some pathway to citizenship, eventually, and at the very least receive legal status that will allow them to stay and work in the country. Families who have been split up by our immigration laws will also be able to reunite under this blueprint. If your name is Tom Tancredo, Mark Krikorian, or any of the anti-immigrant groups, you are a waste of breath.

The Republican Party, if they can miraculously manage to control the nativists of the party who have done nothing for the GOP but drive their party into its current demographic nosedive, may have taken their first step in giving themselves a fighting chance among Latinos. Without immigration as a major policy issue, the GOP will be able to focus on policies that will resonate among Latinos, like job creation, small business regulations, education, and infrastructure. However, getting immigration off the table will also require the GOP to reassess how its policies will benefit Latinos into the future, such as social security, health care, and most importantly, finding some way to translate GOP policies into a more urban context.

The shift in the discussion over immigration from a family-based policy to an economic-based one is a fundamental shift in how we view immigrants. STEM is basically code for “no Mexicans”, and the GOP has managed a slight of hand that will make them appear more pro-immigrant than they really are. Rather than training and promoting STEM education among Latinos at home, this blueprint focuses on importing skilled labor from places other than Mexico. This is a concern that Latinos should keep a close eye on as the bill takes shape over the weeks to come.

If you are a “free market” person, this immigration reform should not make you happy. Even with the increase in the number of available visas, the numbers are a joke. The folks at Cato Institute have already made this clear and despite the refocus on Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) fields, this plan only gives the impression that it is an economic-based immigration bill. One of the primary tenets of free market capitalism is that the economy is simply too complicated for any government program to respond to its needs, and that market forces are best able to handle shifts in supply and demand. STEM appeals to those who claim to be capitalist while violating one of its primary rules.

Not surprisingly, then, the unions have been able to keep their hands clean on all of this by limiting the number of visas and allowing the nativists to do their dirty work for them. By integrating most of the eleven million already here, they will have a ripe recruiting ground of immigrants who are already likely to know other union members in the family. The unions in California and Nevada, in particular, see an opportunity to expand their influence while limiting future job competition, and they seem to have achieved their goal.

I am still unsure of the Democrats’ strategy in all of this. Their primary advantage in the immigration debate was doing just enough not to solve the immigration problem. This was always an important side-benefit for the Democrats, since it allowed them to use immigration to recruit and mobilize Latinos while the GOP played willful actors in vilifying their own party. Perhaps the influence of Latinos within the Democratic Party has grown so strong that that strategy was no longer acceptable to the ethos of the party.