

## Immigration Reform: Biblical No-Brainer, Political Non-Starter?

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Columnist

With the future of health care reform still uncertain, faith-based groups are hoping to jump-start a movement for the “other” reform package facing Congress — an immigration overhaul that has stalled despite President Obama’s promise to push it forward this year.

In a conference call with reporters this week, representatives of a range of religious groups were joined by two members of Congress to unveil a month-long campaign that will begin by delivering thousands of postcards to Capitol Hill offices, continue with some 100 events across the country during the President’s Day recess and into early March, and culminate with a large immigration reform rally in Washington on Sunday, March 21.

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The goal is to use both moral suasion and practical arguments — that immigrants bring value to the American economy and are not competition for scarce jobs — to change a legislative dynamic that seems even more daunting than in 2007, when a promising bill co-sponsored by John McCain and Ted Kennedy and supported by President Bush died in the Senate in the face of Republican opposition.

Now Kennedy is dead, McCain is tacking right to save his political life, and the economy has tanked while Tea Party rage is on the rise. So what makes faith leaders think they can move the mountain now? They are taking a two-pronged approach: to change hearts and minds by framing the debate as a “moral imperative,” and to deploy some old-fashioned political organizing and lobbying.

“What’s different about this campaign is that we are really reaching out to voters and to non-immigrant communities and forming coalitions on the ground with people who are not our traditional allies,” said Fa-



2009 immigration rally. Stan Hoda, AFP, Getty Images

ther Jon Pedigo, pastor of a Catholic parish in San Jose, California. “We feel that through very targeted local work we will be able to go about this” — campaigning for immigration reform — “in a much more determined way.”

“We should not be wasting time with friends who don’t need to be converted,” echoed Rep. Mike Honda, a Democrat who represents California’s Silicon Valley.

The interfaith coalition, which represents mainline and evangelical Protestants, Jewish groups, and the Catholic hierarchy, knows it has an uphill battle. For religious leaders, the Judeo-Christian ethic, as based in scripture, is clear: welcome the stranger, strengthen families, care for the needy, do justice to one’s neighbor. And in legislative terms, that means supporting immigration reform that allows both legal and undocumented people a path to citizenship, that focuses on keeping immigrant families united, and that brings security and consistency to border enforcement.

But polls consistently show immigration

reform

is a relatively low priority for most Americans, and according to a survey from the Pew Hispanic Center last year, just 31 percent of Latinos said it was an “extremely important” issue for President Obama to resolve.

Jobs, education and, yes, health care reform, are higher priorities, and immigrants — especially the 11 million undocumented immigrants estimated to be living in the United States — are increasingly seen as threats to the economic well-being of native-born Americans, even while the number of illegal immigrants has fallen significantly in the last year.

Remember that Rep. Joe Wilson’s famous “You lie!” outburst at Obama during his address on health care last September was prompted by the president’s assertion that health care reform would not cover illegal immigrants, as some believed.

With those concerns in mind, the faith leaders behind the campaign, called “Together, not Torn: Families Can’t Wait for

Immigration Reform,” frequently cite data showing that immigration actually boosts economic growth and creates jobs rather than taking them away from Americans.

Ironically, that argument is also made by pro-business and conservative groups. The libertarian Cato Institute last summer released a study claiming that legalizing the more than eight million undocumented workers in the United States would bring an added \$180 billion to the U.S. economy over the next decade while simply toughening laws and tightening borders would actually hurt American households economically.

But the current political calculus does not follow the same logic as economic data.

Burned by the Senate’s inability to pass a popular immigration reform bill in 2007, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has said she will not force her members to take a politically volatile vote unless she is sure the Senate will also pass the bill. And many Republicans are already preaching from the populist gospel, calling immigration reform an “amnesty” and a “job killer.”

“Allowing millions of illegal immigrants to stay and take jobs away from citizens and legal immigrants is like giving a burglar a key to the house,” Rep. Lamar Smith of Texas, the ranking Republican on the House Judiciary Committee, said in December after Illinois Democrat Luis Gutierrez introduced an immigration reform bill. “Those stolen jobs rightfully belong to citizens and legal immigrants. We could cut the unemployment rate in half simply by enforcing immigration laws!”

Apart from battling such perceptions, the faith leaders and House representatives on Wednesday’s conference call also recognized that immigration reform is a still hostage to health care reform. The issues “are interlocked to a certain degree” said New York Democrat Yvette Clark. But she added that “we’re vry capable of multi-tasking,” and Honda noted that since the immigration bill has already been introduced, “once we finish health care reform we’ll be ready to go.”

Given that South Carolina Republican Lindsey Graham has bucked his party by announcing his support for immigration reform, giving him the role McCain once played, advocates are hopeful that there could be a bipartisan path to 60 votes in the Senate. But a clear message in the campaign launched this week was that senators would now have to “stand up and declare themselves” on the issue, as Honda put it. The politicians and faith leaders also want to pressure Obama to make good on his commitment to reform.

“We know this won’t be an easy conversation or an easy legislative issue,” said the Rev. Jennifer Kottler, spokeswoman for Christians for Comprehensive Immigration Reform.

And the problems facing religious leaders are not only in Congress, but also in their own pews.

An online survey of more than 42,000 Catholic, mainline Protestant, born-again Protestant, and Jewish voters, released at the end of December by the Center for Immigration Studies, showed that by wide margins believers say that the level of immigration is too high, that it is largely due to lax enforcement, and that immigrants take jobs away from American workers.

Those beliefs held sway even among Jewish voters, who are among the most liberal Americans, and for Catholics, whose leadership has been among the most active in promoting immigration reform, noting that the Catholic Church in the United States is a community of immigrants that is still growing thanks largely to immigration.

Evangelicals were the most conservative group polled — which was no surprise.

Yet Galen Carey, director of Government Affairs at the National Association of Evangelicals and a participant in the conference call this week, said he believes that is changing. The board of the NAE, which represents voices across the evangelical spectrum, last October unanimously adopted a resolution strongly backing immigration reform.

Carey added that evangelicals are learning more about biblical teachings that support care for migrants. And he and others noted that many Americans do not realize that most immigrants are Christians, and that many other immigrants become Christians when they arrive in America. As a result, evangelicals “are seeing the hand of God working through migration patterns” as they see the influx of immigrants into their churches. “So that is very much transforming our views toward immigrants here in the United States.”

The goal now, said the faith leaders, is to work the “grassroots” and the “grasstops,” as Father Pedigo put it — local leaders and communities in places like Colorado and Ohio and Pennsylvania where anti-immigrant sentiment can run high — to create “a national moral compass that sees immigrants as our brothers and sisters.”

“So it’s a more strategic effort, a more strategic message,” Pedigo said.

Part of that strategy may also be exploiting the fact that immigration has waned significantly since the recession took hold. The Department of Homeland Security reported this week said that there were an estimated 800,000 fewer illegal immigrants in the United States in 2009 than in 2008, the biggest drop in years. That could provide another argument for fixing the immigration system now.

“You don’t fix a bridge during rush hour,” said Jen Smyers of Church World Service. “You fix it now, so when there is an uptick in immigration we’re ready.”

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