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## Immigration Reform Is a Progressive Issue

We Need to Actively Stand Behind and Promote Comprehensive Reform Efforts



A member of community services organization Make The Road New York rehearses chants ahead of the march in Washington on Sunday.  
SOURCE: AP/Diego Graglia

By **Vanessa Cárdenas** | March 19, 2010

As we enter the final days of negotiation on a health care bill, the foundation has already been laid for Congress to take up immigration reform next. Yet some progressives are asking: Why can't immigration reformers just wait? Isn't Congress a little busy? The answer is that the Latino immigrant community simply cannot wait, and progressives should join this fight not only because it's the right thing to do, but because it is in our collective best interest to reform our dysfunctional immigration system.

Responding to the large mobilization set to happen this weekend, President Obama held a meeting last Thursday with advocates for immigration reform as well as Sens. Chuck Schumer (D-NY) and Lindsay Graham (R-SC) who have **published** a framework for reform and are taking the lead in writing a bill. The president reiterated his support and committed to taking some concrete steps to move the debate forward, including a renewed **pledge** of his commitment. Now, Latino and immigrant communities are mobilizing in an unprecedented way to grow the momentum in a manifestation of their growing political power.

Labor, business, and faith leaders will descend on Washington, D.C. this Sunday along with blacks, whites, Latinos, Asians, and others for the **March for America** to call for immigration reform and economic justice for all. This mobilization is warranted because we are well aware that if an immigration bill is not introduced in the next few weeks, immigration reform would have to wait for another year, or even two, to get back on the legislative agenda. And this prospect is simply untenable for those of us who live and breathe the realities of our broken immigration system.

Most Americans are perhaps unaware of the toll our antiquated immigration policies place on immigrants and their families, but those of us who know it cannot ignore it.

Deportations have **increased** to almost 400,000 in 2009 under the Obama administration—more than double what they were under President Bush when he left office. These policies, combined with the dysfunctionality of our immigration system, are having a vile impact on the Latino/immigrant community, on our youth, and our families. **Children** are being separated from their parents, undocumented **workers** are being exploited because of their status, and American **workers** are being undercut by unscrupulous employers. Smugglers are kidnapping immigrants in an effort to **extort money** from their families. And every year, hundreds of children end up in **detention** at the border as they try to reunite with their families in the United States.

Are these situations worse or more important than unemployment? Or lack of health care? Or homelessness? Of course not, but this is not a zero-sum game. We can tackle more than one problem at a time, and regardless of what our congressional leaders may lead us to believe, they can chew gum and walk at the same time. If we don't fix our broken immigration system now it will become an issue in every single legislative battle Congress engages in. The implications and reality of having 10 to 12 million people living on the fringes of society would be simply unavoidable. This is why it is in our collective best interest to move this issue off the table sooner rather than later.

The benefits of comprehensive immigration reform are well documented, so this is not a question of whether or not immigration reform is good for our country. A recent CAP/IPC [report](#) demonstrated that creating a legalization process for unauthorized workers would yield \$1.5 trillion in cumulative U.S. gross domestic product over 10 years. These findings are consistent with other reports published by other organizations such as the [Cato Institute](#), which found that reform would add roughly \$80 billion to the U.S. economy per year. And a [report](#) released in February by the Economic Policy Institute found that immigration raises the average wages of U.S.-born workers by 0.4 percent and fuels the growth of the U.S. economy.

Immigration reform makes economic sense, and it is part of the larger struggle for justice and fairness. Latinos, whether they are U.S. born, legal permanent residents, or immigrants have galvanized around this issue because we have felt the anti-immigrant sentiment that the policy debate has generated. As the [FBI reports](#), *hate crimes against Latinos* rose by more than 40 percent from 2003 to 2007. And what's scarier is that a recent [report](#) by the Southern Poverty Law Center found that there has been an explosion of right-wing "Patriot" groups targeting nonwhite immigrants. This is real, and it is happening all around us.

This is why Latinos and other immigrant communities, regardless of when or where we came from, have come to understand the inherent problems of being "the other" and we believe that immigration reform is but one of the many fights we must engage in order to advance an agenda that promotes fairness, justice, and prosperity for all.

This vision is why immigrant and Latino voters mobilized in the 2008 election. We believed in the vision President Obama articulated for our nation and in his [promise](#) that he would make immigration reform a priority during his first year in office. It's true that turnout from all voter groups increased in the 2008 election, but the number of Latinos who went to the polls [surged](#) to nearly 25 percent above levels from the 2004 election, with the biggest increase among newly naturalized immigrants and first time voters.

Immigration reformers have the policy solutions we need to fix our outdated immigration system. We have a clear idea of what needs to be done and a plan that is both realistic and consistent with American values. What's more, the American public [supports](#) it. We need to ensure that we get the undocumented to register, pay their taxes, pass background checks, and learn English, and get into the back of the line to earn legalization.

This is an important moment for the Latino and immigrant community and for progressives in general. It is time to strengthen our bonds together in this struggle, and we all stand to gain if we do.

**For more on the march, see:**

- [Blacks vs. Immigrants Is a Zero-Sum Argument](#)
- [Senate Leaders Reveal Immigration Framework](#)

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