

# THE COMMERCIAL APPEAL

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## **To help U.S., mainstream immigrants**

By: Bryce W. Ashby and Michael J. LaRosa - November 25, 2012

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With their party's loss in the presidential election and failure to retake the majority in the U.S. Senate, Republicans are now considering reaching out to Latino voters who on Nov. 6 resoundingly supported President Barack Obama and the Democrats. Their overtures are focusing on a renewed effort to pass comprehensive immigration reform, and there are five compelling factors that favor action on this critical socioeconomic initiative:

-- The normalization of immigration status for 12 million undocumented immigrants offers a significant source of potential revenue.

The last serious push toward comprehensive immigration reform proposed requiring undocumented immigrants to pay a \$2,000 fine and all back taxes before being placed on a path to permanent residency. With an estimated 12 million undocumented immigrants living and working in the United States, simple arithmetic demonstrates the revenue-generating potential of reform. Additionally, moving forward from that revenue, a study from the libertarian Cato Institute projects that legalizing the undocumented population could generate \$4.5 billion to \$5.4 billion in new tax revenue over the three years following the law's implementation.

-- Bringing 12 million undocumented immigrants out of the shadows will result in an economic boon in our communities and help financially strapped workers.

The same Cato Institute report estimates that comprehensive immigration reform would increase the U.S. gross domestic product by at least \$1.5 trillion over 10 years. In

contrast, mass deportation would reduce the GDP by 1.46 percent, or \$2.6 trillion, over the same 10-year period due to the loss of millions of consumers in the U.S. market.

Immigrant and nonimmigrant workers alike would see a significant direct benefit from comprehensive immigration reform. The normalization of this population's status would raise the wage floor for all workers by eliminating a cheap source of labor.

-- America needs to attract and retain the best and brightest of immigrants to our shores.

For our economy to succeed and truly thrive, we need a constant renewal and influx of new energy and ideas. Continual flows of talented, hard-working immigrants to our shores have always been vital to the U.S. economy and society. First-generation immigrants make up 12.5 percent of all business owners in the U.S. and immigrants — risk-takers by definition — are 30 percent more likely to start a business than nonimmigrants.

Reformation of our current student visa program could offer a tremendous benefit to our economy. Currently, the F-1 student visa program requires applicants to maintain a nonimmigrant intent. In other words, visa holders must demonstrate that they have no intent of attempting to stay in the United States. Although this requirement was designed to avoid the so-called "brain drain" from developing countries, in our new interconnected world we need a system that permits a pathway to permanent residency for talented and educated students. It makes no economic sense to educate and train an individual and then force her to return to her home country in order to compete with us.

Our agriculture sector needs a reliable and consistent source of migrant workers in the field and those workers need better protection.

A significant goal of immigration reform would involve passage of what's known as the AgJobs bill or "Agricultural Jobs, Opportunity, Benefits, and Security Act." This bill, developed through negotiations between the United Farm Workers and the agriculture industry, would streamline the hiring of agricultural guest workers. At the same time, it would preserve and enhance key protections for this vulnerable labor force.

The need for such reform is clear. In Alabama, the passage of a draconian anti-immigrant law in 2010 drove migrant workers out of the state. Crops were left

unattended in the fields, and farmers adjusted by planting less in subsequent years. The elimination of jobs and profits in this sector could be avoided through comprehensive reform.

-- And finally, morally we have no other option.

For more than a decade, both sides of the aisle have agreed that our current immigration system is fundamentally broken. It creates perverse incentives for employers to hire undocumented immigrants for substandard wages. It provides no pathway for the legal migration of foreigners who do not already hold an advanced degree, significant wealth or some rare skill. It also undermines the potential of hundreds of thousands of talented young students who, despite being born elsewhere, consider the United States home and have no opportunity for advancement thanks to our broken system.

Instead of working from a blueprint that has existed for more than a decade to address these issues, we have been distracted by the empty rhetoric of ideologues whose shouts of "increased enforcement," "thousand-mile border fences" and "self-deportation" have led us away from practical, prudent and humane reform. Our history and culture as Americans is immigrant driven. Those who forget that lesson undermine our economy, our future and our nation's fundamental character.

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