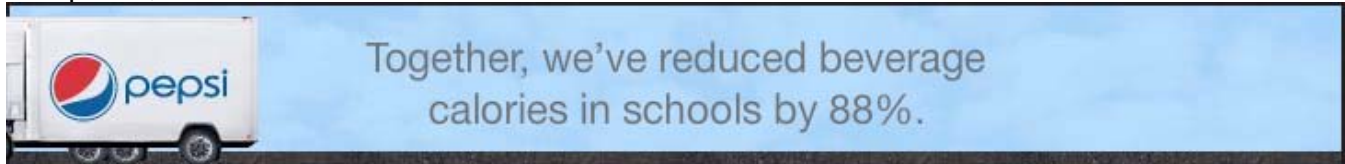


April 27, 2010



This is the print preview: [Back to normal view »](#)

**Ray Suarez**

Host of Destination Casablanca on HITN.tv

Posted: April 21, 2010 09:19 AM

## Immigration Reform

Quick: If a family's time in America began with a visa overstay or an unauthorized crossing into the United States, should that family be allowed to stay in the country? And if that worker or that family is allowed to stay, should people out of status be allowed to legalize status or even become an American citizen?

The Big Questions are as simple as that, and how you answer them can be emotional, and politically divisive.

The Obama Administration had been quietly promising members of Congress, and leaders of national Latino organizations, that comprehensive immigration reform was climbing the "to do" list. As soon as the economy was stabilized and health care reform was done, immigration was to be next.

With that in mind, Destination Casa Blanca had an interesting panel knock around the chances for an immigration bill during this session, or even during this presidency. Because of the mix of the panel personnel, there was no anti-immigration spokesperson aboard. But even with that, there was significant disagreement on the politics, strategy, and tactics available to the president and supporters of an immigration overhaul.

Ali Noorani, Executive Director of the National Immigration Forum, insists that there's still time left before the midterm elections to move an immigration bill to the president's desk. Even after the bruising battle over health care? Even in the face of a resolute Republican caucus with serious differences over how to proceed over immigration?

In a word, yes. Noorani says the major initiatives contained in draft legislation making the rounds in the House and Senate have been knocking around Capitol Hill for more than a decade. There are few members who aren't already familiar with the proposals and what they entail: border security, English language education, employer enforcement, family unity, and a path to

citizenship.

Juan Carlos Hidalgo from Cato represents a Washington-based research organization that is generally in favor of low levels of regulation, small government, and low taxes. Cato supports immigration reform, and its studies show that a path to legalization and a guest worker program will create jobs, spur economic activity, and increase profits. Hidalgo didn't hide his criticism of how the Administration got health care reform passed, and concedes that the current atmosphere in Congress makes the road tougher for immigration reform.

Alfonso Aguilar led the US Office of Citizenship in the Bush Administration and now works to encourage conservative political outreach to Latinos. He too wants to remind conservatives that the proposals do not amount to "amnesty." He doesn't like that word at all. The current proposals include provisions that require illegal immigrants to concede wrongdoing, pay fines, and pay back taxes.

The talk was smart, well-informed, fast-moving. But if I had any frustration at all, it was in the triumph of optimism over all: we carried on exchanging points as if the immigration thunderstorm of 2006 and 2007 never happened. At several junctures it was pointed out that poll after poll reflects a willingness among American citizens to allow a path to citizenship and a rejection of mass deportation. But as we saw with health care, what most Americans thought at any given time ended up not mattering a whole lot at many junctures in that long battle. Hidalgo, Noorani, and Aguilar all expressed the hope that if immigration came up this year we would not see a repeat of 06/07, when a vicious backlash against immigration reform made John McCain bail out on his own bill, saying he wouldn't vote for his own handiwork if it came up for a vote! The heat around the immigration debate made it impossible to have an adult conversation about immigration.

What kind of immigrants benefit the country?

Should anyone who wants to come be allowed to move here?

What requirements should the United States put in place?

Should future immigrants make certain promises to the country and its people, taking on obligations in return for being allowed to come?

Please do not misunderstand me. I'm not saying anyone who's against immigration reform is a nativist, or a hater. Far from it. There are plenty of reasons to question the wisdom of opening the doors to legal status for millions more immigrants after the country's earlier experience with the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986.

Back in the 1980s, Congress and President Reagan agreed to a solution to the growing numbers of people in the United States who had become workers and residents without following the rules set out by the Justice Department. Their solution? Set up a process to give legal status to millions already in the country, and make it harder for people who came in the future to work in the United States. Some three million people got legal status, and most of them are US citizens today. But the enforcement end of the law, meant to discourage future illegal immigrants, was never serious.

Watching the fury of the current political conversation in the country I wonder if the cool, cerebral, thoughtful conversation we had in Washington is going to resemble the coming immigration debate in any way. My guests seemed to think so... all said the Republicans do not want to commit political suicide... all said the results of the 2008 elections (and the surprises waiting in the coming 2010 census results) will make any political party more careful about

speaking to (and about) immigrant and immigrant-allied communities.

Public opinion research would seem to indicate that the Congress is not in line with widespread public opinion on what to do about immigrants. If the president and congressional Democrats take up immigration during 2010, which is hardly guaranteed, what kind of reception will they get this time?

What do you think? Let us know!

For more videos, click here.

