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Time for immigration policy reform

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By Justin Akers Chacon

Congress should move quickly from health care to immigration reform. But to succeed, it will have to beat back specious anti-immigrant claims.

Rep. Luis Gutierrez (D-Ill.) last month introduced the Comprehensive Immigration Reform for America's Security and Prosperity Act. The bill is the first effort to pass federal immigration reform under the Obama administration and a Democrat-controlled Congress after several failed attempts during the Bush era.

The Gutierrez proposal and a forthcoming Senate counterpart reflect the Democrats' efforts to fulfill a campaign promise that turned out large numbers to the polls in their favor. It also reflects the growing clout of Latino and immigrant voters, a rising force in U.S. politics.

There is broad public support for immigration reform that would provide a path to citizenship. A Pew Research Center study in May found 63 percent of the population supports a legalization program, with 73 percent of Democrats and 50 percent of Republicans in favor.

With a Democratic majority, broad public support for reform and a current immigration policy that is outdated and dysfunctional, the time is ripe to pass a real reform.

Despite the alignment of favorable forces, the persistence of anti-immigrant ideology continues to poison the well of American politics, alleging that undocumented workers take jobs from U.S. citizens.

But this is not the case. "Locales with high unemployment rates do not necessarily have large numbers of recent immigrants, and locales with many recent immigrants do not necessarily have high unemployment rates," notes the Immigration Policy Center.

This shows that unemployment is more structural than the result of a direct competition for the same jobs. Immigrants have supplemented a graying American work force rather than supplanted it.

Access to legal status and citizenship for the undocumented work force would be good for the whole economy. The **Cato Institute** estimates that giving undocumented immigrants a path to citizenship would add \$180 billion to the gross domestic

product.

Conversely, the emphasis on increased enforcement has proven costly, ineffective and disruptive to the lives of millions of people who have committed no crime except working without papers. It would cost an estimated \$200 billion to remove the undocumented population, according to the Department of Homeland Security. Instead of spending that money in this coercive way, the United States could put those badly needed resources where they can be used to create jobs.

In the coming months, the majority that favors a real immigration reform policy -- one that unites and integrates undocumented immigrant families with full rights, opportunities and equal protection before the law -- will need to raise its voice.

Those on the other side will be raising theirs.

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