

Achieving Immigration Reform One Victory at a Time
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The need for comprehensive immigration reform is obvious to most sane-minded Americans.

Elements of a consensus exist, away from the Conservative fringe, on the dimensions of reform that are required. They remain broadly those at the core of the bipartisan legislation introduced in 2006: a secure border, a radically different guest-worker system, an effective (and this time implemented) employer verification program, and an earned pathway to citizenship for those illegally here, one that does not disadvantage immigrants entering the country through legal channels themselves in need of reform.

What is more in contention is the priority to be given to this key piece of progressive reform by an administration already facing, as the President said on Monday, “a pretty big stack of bills”.

The dangers of putting reform off to 2010 or 2011 are obvious, particularly to many in the Latino community. More hiding in the shadows. More ICE raids to break up struggling families. More hostile amendments slipped into legislation by Republicans from border states. More danger of dwindling popular support for a progressive President. More likelihood that a crowded legislative agenda will grow more crowded still.

Yet the administration’s expectation and amended commitment remains clear. The President’s expectation is that Congress will begin drafting legislation this year. His amended commitment is to pursue its passage into law in 2010.

There seems no reason to fear that this commitment will be abandoned.

So how now to help? Paradoxically, less by campaigning for comprehensive immigration reform than by campaigning for something else: affordable health care for all Americans.

The great barrier to a successful reform of our immigration system in 2010 is not Obama backsliding. It is an emboldened and mobilized Conservative base in 2009. It was that base that broke bipartisanship on immigration reform during the second Bush term. It was that base which led the charge against the Obama stimulus package. It is that base which is now trying to howl down the advocates of health care reform.

If Conservative extremists succeed in blocking health care reform, they will block immigration reform too. And they will no doubt do it by using similar tactics – deceit, scaremongering, the disruption of meetings, the funding of ultra-conservative candidates, even the implicit threat of violence.

There is more at stake right now than even health care or immigration reform. What is at stake is the capacity of the American political system to deliver the progressive program for which a majority of the electorate voted last November

Progressives everywhere need to design their fall campaigning to parallel the conservative counter insurgency now being mobilized against the Obama administration. Fighting deceit with facts, disruption with argument, our key task is that of putting steel in the spine of liberal policy makers: steel on health care first, on energy conservation second, and then on immigration reform in its turn.

The way you advance progressive causes, the liberal R.H. Tawney once told the British Labor Party, is to “mobilize behind you a body of conviction as resolute and as informed as the opposition you face.” “Don’t encourage your supporters,” he said, “to ask what they will get from you, as though a campaign were a picnic, all beer and sunshine. Instead, make them understand that your return to power is just the first phase of a struggle, the outcome of which depends on them.”

Well, we are in that struggle now. Jim DeMint knows it. He knows if he can stop Obama on health care, he can stop him for good. That must not happen, which is why the route to reform on the border now lives through the reform of how you pay for your hospital bed.

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