



Comprehensive Immigration Reform: Promoting Opportunity for All

As Congress debates comprehensive immigration reform in the coming weeks, unified messaging for promoting reform that expands opportunity for everyone in our country will be key. Such messages should include the concepts of a pathway to citizenship and human rights for newcomers, as well as greater economic security and mobility for native born workers and citizens. Following are some suggestions on overall themes and some additional tools the immigrant rights movement has developed.

Major Messages and Themes

Recent research suggests six principles for communications on immigrants and opportunity:

1. **Lead with Values:** Americans are most likely support policies that welcome immigrants when they're reminded of our national values of opportunity, linked fate, and mutual responsibility. "Transactional" arguments about immigrants paying more in taxes than they "take" in services just reinforce the anti-immigrant frame of newcomers as a potential burden.
2. **Emphasize Workable Solutions to a Broken System:** Americans across the political spectrum agree that our immigration system needs fixing and that it's unrealistic to deport 12 million people. Our communications should promote a pathway to earned citizenship as part of a workable solution that serves the interest of our country. Anti-immigrant policies should be disparaged as reactionary policies that have been tried and failed to solve the problem.
3. **Patriotism, Fairness and Responsibility:** Many people who are "on the fence" about immigrant rights and integration worry that today's immigrants lack the patriotism of native born Americans and that the current system rewards unfair or irresponsible behavior. We should emphasize that our solutions reward people who love America and allow them (and the people who employ them) to act responsibly, following fair and workable rules.
4. **Work, English, and Taxes:** The fact that immigrants will have to work hard, learn English and pay taxes in order to earn legal residency and citizenship is a very powerful one for swing audiences. This fact can't be repeated enough.
5. **A Part of Us:** Instead of describing immigrants as outsiders who are good for us, we should remind audiences that immigrants are *a part of us*, and always have been. (Note

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that this is different from saying “we’re a nation of immigrants,” which is off-putting for many African American and Native American audiences).

6. **Rising Together:** Anti-immigrant groups are actively working to drive a wedge between immigrants, African Americans, and low-wage workers. It’s important for us to convey our shared values and common interests (leading with values) as well as solutions that expand opportunity for everyone—e.g., combining an earned pathway to citizenship with enhanced civil rights enforcement, living wages, and job training for communities experiencing job insecurity.

Consider these sample messages:

We need to move from our broken immigration system to one that is orderly, workable, and consistent with our nation’s values. We can do that by allowing immigrants who work, pay taxes, and learn English to earn a pathway to citizenship. Those steps, along with reforms like increased civil rights enforcement and sanctions for employers that exploit workers will raise wages and expand economic opportunity for everyone.

Immigrants are part of the fabric of our society—they are our neighbors, our co-workers, our friends. Reactionary policies that force them into the shadows haven’t worked, and are not consistent with our values. Those policies hurt all of us by encouraging exploitation by unscrupulous employers and landlords. We support policies that help immigrants contribute and participate fully in our society.

For generations, and today, America represents a promise of opportunity. We need to develop an immigration system that integrates immigrants who come here to work, pay taxes, and learn English.

Persistent Questions

It’s important to address issues that worry persuadable audiences, while emphasizing our values and the importance of positive immigration reform to opportunity for everyone in this country. The following suggested messages reflect recent communication research and experience:

“Amnesty”

Much of the legislative debate has revolved around whether a pathway to citizenship constitutes “amnesty.” We recommend staying out of extended debates about what is and is not “amnesty”—doing so just reinforces the anti-immigrant frame. Instead, we suggest quickly countering the amnesty allegation, then returning to a core positive message. For example:

This is not amnesty; it’s an opportunity, which is what America is all about. It’s an opportunity for people to earn a place in American society by paying taxes, learning

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English, working hard, and staying out of trouble. Some will make it, and some won't. It's an opportunity to replace the broken immigration system with one that serves our economy and our national values. And it's a chance to be the land of opportunity that America has always aspired to be, for citizens and newcomers alike.

Reactionary, anti-immigrant policies have repeatedly failed to fix the problem. They're not workable and they're not fair to citizens or to immigrants—they hurt all of us and make a bad system worse.

An earned path to citizenship [for people who work hard, learn English, and pay taxes] is workable and consistent with our values as a nation.

Our immigration system has been broken for a long time and many business owners and workers alike have disregarded that system. Now is our chance to fix the system and make it stick. That means creating a workable process that serves our economy and our values; that includes a pathway to citizenship for people who work, pay taxes and fines, and learn English. And it means strict enforcement against workplaces that don't follow that new system.

Low Wage Workers and African Americans

Current media coverage often frames immigration reform in terms of competition between new immigrants and native-born workers—especially African Americans—for low-wage jobs. It's important to emphasize the shared interests of these workers and the common solutions that benefit all workers and the country. For example:

A pathway to citizenship and human rights for current and future immigrants is crucial to the interests of our country and, especially, to the interests of working Americans. If our government keeps people in the shadows, without rights or a shot at the American Dream, it will depress the wages and job prospects of all workers in this country. And it will continue to violate our values as a nation. But if we move those people into the economic mainstream, we can rise together.

For America to be a land of opportunity for everyone who lives here, our policies must recognize that we're all in it together, with common human rights and responsibilities. If one group can be exploited, underpaid and prevented from becoming part of our society, none of us will enjoy the opportunity and rights that America stands for.

Immigrants and African Americans have always had shared interests and a linked fate, and we need solutions that enable us to rise together with all Americans. Both groups consistently list quality education and affordable health care among their highest priorities. Both groups' kids suffer when we allow our urban schools and hospitals to flounder, and both benefit, along with our country, when we invest in strong schools and quality health care, as well as living wages and decent working conditions.

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Research shows that immigrants and African Americans continue to experience high levels of racial discrimination in employment and housing and when seeking credit—think of all the restaurants many of you have been to in which immigrants can be busboys, and African Americans can clean up at closing time, but neither can have the more lucrative jobs as servers or greeters. Immigration didn't create any of those problems, but immigrants and African Americans have a shared interest in solving them.

Temporary Worker Programs

In arguing against any program that limits immigrants' ability to qualify for citizenship or permanent residency, we recommend emphasizing fairness, family, and valuing hard work instead of exploiting it. For example:

There are forces bent on excluding large numbers of workers from our society. They're pushing unrealistic immigration reform that would bring workers here with no chance of ever becoming citizens or bringing their families with them. Providing an earned path to citizenship for people who work hard, learn English, and pay taxes is the only solution that is consistent with our values as a nation. Splitting up families and exploiting workers is not what America is about.

Any proposal that would allow people to work, but not become a full member of society violates our most basic values. This country is built on the idea that if you come here, work hard and pay taxes, you have a shot at the American Dream. It's this mixture of hard work and hope that has fueled our country's growth since its inception. We need to build on that historic value when creating a new system: we need a fair system that rewards hard work instead of exploiting it.

Family

Proposals to replace immigration based on family ties with a so-called “merit” system rely on the myth of “chain migration.” We should avoid that rhetoric and focus on the importance of family to all of our lives, and to the experience of becoming an American.

It's in all our interest for people who are here legally in this new system to become part of our society, with roots and responsibilities here. Honoring family ties is essential to that process of becoming an American and ensuring strong communities.

Some propose that we ignore family ties in our immigration system. But Americans agree that honoring family is a core value, and one of the values that we most respect in others. Welcoming newcomers but separating and splitting their families is contrary to who we are as a nation.

For more than 40 years our system has focused on both allowing Americans to reunite with their closest family members and allowing employers to bring in the highly skilled workers

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they need. These dual priorities have served us well and honored our history and values. Why break the one part of our current system that is working?

Due Process

In supporting due process and civil liberties for immigrants in the legislative process, research shows that the most effective arguments for “persuadable” audiences focus not on immigrants, but on the importance of due process to all of us, and to our way of life. The Rights Working Group suggests the following messaging.

Right now the government requires judges to deport undocumented parents automatically and leave their children here to fend for themselves or go into foster care. It does not allow judges to consider individual circumstances. America loses when the government forces judges to deport parents who are paying taxes, contributing to society, and working towards citizenship.

In America the punishment should fit the crime. Not allowing judges to consider the circumstances of a case violates this principle and does not solve the problem of undocumented immigration. We need to allow judges to consider the circumstances of each individual case and decide what is best for that situation. When the government denies due process to anyone in this country, it threatens the freedom of all of us. [U](#)

Shared Benefits

Several problematic proposals would deny newly documented immigrants the benefit of their past Social Security payments, Earned Income Tax Credits, and other benefits that we share as Americans. In arguing for full rights and responsibilities for new Americans, we recommend emphasizing the importance of keeping those programs fair and inclusive for everyone.

Our Social Security system has served our country well for over 70 years based on a simple principle: if you work hard and pay into the system, you can count on your contributions in your old age. I believe in that principle, and in keeping Social Security fair and secure for all U.S. workers. That includes people who’ve earned citizenship or permanent legal status through hard work, paying taxes, and learning English. As we fix our broken immigration system to create fair and workable rules that serve our country into the future, we must also keep Social Security fair and workable. That means that all American citizens and legal residents who paid into the system through hard work must be able to count on their contribution in old age.

These future citizens are part of the fabric of our society, and a vital part of our nation’s economic engine. They have been working hard for decades, contributing to our productivity as a nation, and contributing to the Social Security system like all workers in our country. To become legal residents, they must continue working, pay taxes, and learn English. It would be grossly unfair to say that once they have done all of those things to

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earn a place in America, our government will simply take the Social Security contributions that they have made over the decades.

Values Bridge Message

In general, it's important not to get bogged down in debates about whether undocumented immigrants are or are not law breakers, receiving amnesty, or hurting low-income workers. Engaging in such debate only serves to reinforce our opponents' frame. After quickly but firmly addressing legitimate concerns on all of these issues, we recommend bridging back to the larger values and purpose of immigration reform, which most Americans support. For example:

Look, Americans want a solution to our broken immigration system that is workable and fair, and that allows immigrants to be responsible members of our country. Instead of finding excuses to take away workers' rights and limit contact with their own family, let's move forward together.

We should focus on tough border enforcement with an earned pathway to citizenship for people who work, pay taxes, and learn English. Exploitation, punishment and mass deportation of immigrants isn't right or workable. Let's fix our immigration system once and for all, and build on the values we all share.

Additional Resources

Policy Principles

A broad group of civil rights groups has introduced a set of principles http://www.civilrights.org/press_room/buzz_clips/civilrightsorg-stories/low-wage-principles-immigration-reform.html for immigration reform legislation that advance the interests of American low-wage workers as well as immigrants. In addition to human rights protections and a pathway to citizenship for immigrants, the principles include:

- Stepped-up enforcement of antidiscrimination laws;
- Increased enforcement of workplace standards;
- Greater job skills training and adult education opportunities for low-wage workers, young people, and people who lack a high school diploma; and
- Better open vacancy notification systems to disseminate notice of job opportunities broadly and fairly.

Listen http://www.civilrights.org/assets/audio/civil_rights_leaders_on_immigration.mp3 to civil rights leaders speak on the principles of comprehensive immigration. Or read testimony <http://www.civilrights.org/library/advocacy-letters/testimony/wade-henderson-immigration-low-wage.html> before the House Judiciary Committee by Wade Henderson of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights setting out the principles that should guide immigration legislation, including the relationship between immigrants and the African-American workforce.

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Research

A new report <http://www.cccr.org/justice/article.cfm?id=44> from the Citizens' Commission on Civil Rights and the Center for American Progress entitled "The Erosion of Rights" documents the ways in which the federal government is currently falling short in its enforcement of civil and human rights laws. The report provides evidence and concrete steps for the increased enforcement that should accompany immigration reform efforts.

New research documents the contribution that immigrants make to our national and local economies. While we do not recommend leading with "transactional" arguments about immigrants contributing more than they "take" from our country, it is important to know and use the facts beneath the Opportunity Story:

- A new policy paper http://www.aif.org/ipc/policybrief/policybrief_050807.shtml from the Immigration Policy Center debunks myths about the costs and contributions of immigrant working at less-skilled jobs.
- A new study by researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill demonstrates the economic contribution of newcomers to that state's economy. The study shows that North Carolina's Latino population (largely, but not exclusively, comprised of immigrants) contributes more than \$9 billion to the state's economy through its purchases, taxes and labor. If recent migration trends continue, the total economic impact of Hispanic spending in the state could increase to \$18 billion by 2009.

Video Resources

MediaRights offers information on documentary films and shorts

<http://www.mediarights.org/issue/immigration> addressing the immigration issue.

Telling the Community Success Story

Research shows that the predominant media narratives on immigration emphasize competition between immigrants and native born workers and stresses on health care and other social services. Turning that narrative around requires that we tell the story of immigrants, African Americans, and others working together to solve problems, especially through system changes in government and industry. Examples include a recent story from New America Media entitled "Blacks, Latinos Mount Union Drive in North Carolina." http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=2ba158557618d51203a304f247a615dc.

¹¹ From: "Rights Working Group Restore Due Process to the Immigration System Message Guide for Members and Allies in 2007", on file with the Rights Working Group.

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