Immigration reform, the 'Utah Way'

The Washington Post

March 11, 2011 Friday, Regional Edition

The Washington Post
washingtonpost.com

Distribution: Every Zone

Section: EDITORIAL COPY; Pg. A15

Length: 937 words

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Body

SALT LAKE CITY

Utah, where Republicans outnumber Democrats by better than three to one in the state legislature, has passed the nation's most liberal - and most reality-based - policy on illegal ***immigration***. And the Republican governor is expected to sign it.

The legislation includes both a watered-down enforcement provision that police say won't make much difference and a guest-worker program that would make all the difference in the world - if it survives constitutional challenge - by granting legal status to undocumented workers and allowing them to live normal lives. In a nutshell, it's a one-state version of the overarching ***immigration reform*** package that Congress has repeatedly tried, and failed, to enact.

Conservative Republicans here - and Republicans don't get much more conservative than the statehouse variety in Salt Lake - say their bill is a gauntlet thrown down to the feds for their inability to deal with illegal ***immigration*** and the nation's demand for unskilled labor.

That's one ***way*** of looking at it. But the "***Utah Way***," as some are calling it, is also a fraternal attack on Republicans, in Washington and elsewhere, whose only strategy is to demonize, criminalize and deport 11 million illegal immigrants.

Karl Rove, Jeb Bush and Newt Gingrich are among the Republican grandees who have distanced themselves from that approach and warned of the peril it poses for the party. In the wake of Arizona's legislation last year, a wave of copycat bills would go a long ***way*** toward permanently ridding the GOP of Hispanics, the nation's largest and fastest-growing minority.

But it's in ***Utah*** that the Republican deportation caucus has been treated to real abuse. What's interesting is that it's coming from unimpeachable conservatives. If you want to see the most corrosive long-term wedge issue facing the GOP, come to Salt Lake City.

Utah's guest-worker bill doesn't grant citizenship, of course, but in every other ***way*** it's exactly what national Republicans have derided as "amnesty." It would grant work permits to undocumented immigrants, and their immediate families, who pay a fine, clear a criminal background check and study English.

The bill's chief sponsor, state Rep. Bill Wright, is a plain-spoken dairy farmer who describes his politics as "extremely" conservative, likes Sarah Palin and believes he may have once voted for a Democrat - possibly 40 years ago for sheriff. He admires the work ethic of the Hispanic farmhands he's employed over the years and doesn't care much for anything the government does, least of all the idea that it might deport millions of immigrant workers and their families.

"That's not gonna happen," Wright told me. "They've got cars, they've got money borrowed, they own property, they are intertwined. Just be real and face facts the ***way*** they are."

A milestone in setting the stage for Wright's legislation was the "***Utah*** Compact," a pithy declaration of ***reform*** principles drafted last fall by business leaders and conservative elites, who feared ***Utah*** would follow in Arizona's footsteps and risk losing tens of millions of dollars in tourism and convention business, as Arizona did. The compact helped swing public opinion in ***Utah*** away from the illegal-immigrant bashers who admired Arizona's law.

"They've had their 15 minutes in the media and now the adults are going to start talking about how to handle matters," said Paul Mero, executive director of ***Utah***'s most prominent conservative think tank, the *Sutherland Institute*, who helped draft the compact. "We've been able to break through that political barrier put up by the wing nuts who see every brown person as a criminal."

Advocates of the compact included the police, some key elected officials and, critically, the Mormon church, whose members include perhaps 90 percent of ***Utah***'s state lawmakers. They understood that the fast-growing Hispanic community, which counts for 13 percent of ***Utah***'s population and may include more than 100,000 undocumented workers, is vital to the state's tourism, agriculture and construction industries.

The advocates' genius was to reframe the cause of ***immigration reform***, including the guest-worker program, as fundamentally a conservative project. In the face of sound bites from ***reform*** opponents such as "What part of 'illegal' don't you understand?" ***Utah*** conservatives shot back with: What part of destroying the economy don't you understand? And by the ***way***, what part of breaking up families don't you understand?

The question is whether ***Utah*** will inspire similar movements in other states or whether it will remain the exception. On that, the evidence is mixed.

Discouragingly, neither ***Utah***'s two U.S. senators nor its three representatives have backed the ***Utah*** Compact or the just-passed state legislation. Most mainstream Republicans remain stuck on enforcement, which is code for deportation. And the Mormon church, which did much to sway public opinion and to inoculate the guest-worker legislation from conservative attack, has limited influence outside the state.

Encouragingly, though, several conservative states have rejected Arizona-style bills this year. ***Reform*** advocates are at work on versions of the ***Utah*** Compact in Colorado, Georgia, Indiana, Maine, Washington, Idaho and Oregon.

The lesson from the "***Utah Way***" is that pragmatists in search of solutions can initiate a ***reform*** movement outside the legislature and build a case and a coalition that appeal to conservatives. By offering ideas that may provide a fix in the absence of federal action, they may trump the tired slogans of opponents of ***reform***.

The writer is a member of the editorial page staff.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: US REPUBLICAN PARTY (92%); ***IMMIGRATION*** (92%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (90%); POLITICAL PARTIES (90%); US STATE GOVERNMENT (90%); FOREIGN LABOR (90%); DEPORTATION (89%); LEGISLATION (89%); CONSERVATISM (89%); US DEMOCRATIC PARTY (89%); CITIZENSHIP (78%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (78%); LIBERALISM (78%); PLATFORMS & ISSUES (78%); GOVERNORS (78%); PASSPORTS & VISAS (77%); US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT (77%); ETHICS (77%); FINES & PENALTIES (77%); CITIZENSHIP LAW (77%); ***IMMIGRATION*** LAW (77%); CONSTITUTIONAL LAW (73%); FARM LABOR (72%); US PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES 2012 (70%); US PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES 2016 (70%); BACKGROUND CHECKS (60%)

Industry: FARM LABOR (72%)

Person: NEWT GINGRICH (58%); SARAH PALIN (58%); JEB BUSH (58%); KARL ROVE (58%)

Geographic: SALT LAKE CITY, UT, USA (92%); ***UTAH***, USA (94%); ARIZONA, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (79%)

Load-Date: March 11, 2011

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