

## **Opinion: Navarette: Now's a good a time as any to legalize illegal immigrants**

San Jose Mercury News (California)

December 20, 2009 Sunday

Copyright 2009 San Jose Mercury News All Rights Reserved

**Section:** NEWS; **Opinion**

**Length:** 734 words

**Byline:** By Ruben Navarrette Jr. San Diego Union-Tribune

### **Body**

---

With the nation's jobless rate at 10 percent and six applicants for every opening, you might think this is the worst possible **time** for Congress to **legalize** millions of **illegal immigrants**.

Yet that's one of the proposals in a new immigration reform bill introduced by Rep. Luis Gutierrez, D-Ill.

Those who believe you can't discuss immigration in a down economy must also assume that newly **legalized immigrants** would automatically compete for jobs with U.S. workers, and that the last thing our homegrown work force needs in tough **times** is more competition. This is an easy argument to make, but it's not a very strong one for three reasons.

1. There is never a **good time** for Congress to discuss **legalizing** the undocumented.

The last **time** it debated the issue, from 2005 to 2007, the country had a stronger economy and an unemployment rate of less than 5 percent. Even then, many members found the issue too hot to handle. That's because the sticking point isn't the economy or jobs or what's best for U.S. workers.

What really concerns many Americans about the **immigrants** of today is the same thing that has concerned them throughout U.S. history — an irrational but insuppressible fear over shifting demographics and other changes that newcomers bring to the culture, language and landscape.

Americans aren't trying to save jobs. They're trying to save their quality of life. What they're missing is that they often owe this quality of life to the availability of cheap and reliable **illegal immigrant** labor. If they would just admit this, the debate would be **better** off.

2. The whole "**illegal immigrants** take jobs from Americans" argument is bogus.

It's **time** to stop pretending that **illegal immigrants** are really in some wide-scale competition with U.S. workers. Often, what's at stake are jobs that, by their very nature, are unpleasant — working in dairies, tarring roofs, cleaning horse stalls, picking apples, washing windows on skyscrapers, etc.

Americans used to do these jobs, but their children and grandchildren won't do them today. So **immigrants** are hired, many of them **illegal**.

Besides, those relatively few undereducated and unskilled Americans who do compete with **illegal immigrants** — a group that often lacks education and the ability to speak English, as well as legal status — and still lose out have bigger problems than where their next paycheck is coming from. They've obviously made bad choices in life, and now they have to live with the consequences.

Opinion: Navarette: Now's a good a time as any to legalize illegal immigrants

3. As President Obama himself has suggested, one way to level the playing field for beleaguered U.S. workers is to make undocumented **immigrants** legal and take away the incentive for unscrupulous employers to hire them because they can pay them less than U.S. workers.

The best way to stop pitting one group of workers against another is to bring up **immigrants** to a point where they're on par with U.S. workers. To the degree that there is a competition, such a change would make it a fair one and eliminate any advantage that **illegal immigrants** might now enjoy.

Once this happens, employers won't have an incentive to hire **illegal** workers. Problem solved. On the other hand, by keeping **illegal** workers in the shadows, we keep wages low and U.S. workers at a disadvantage. That's not smart or beneficial to the same American labor force the opponents of comprehensive immigration reform claim to care so much about.

So, even with a sluggish U.S. economy, now is as **good** a **time** as any to restart the immigration debate. Although this **time**, we need to achieve a different ending. During the last go-round, there was plenty of ugliness but not enough honesty.

These days, everyone is a victim even whole countries. The fearmongers, nativists and alarmists like to say that the United States is experiencing an "invasion." This convenient narrative implies that Americans haven't been willing actors in this drama and excuses them of any responsibility.

**Illegal** immigration is not something that was done to Americans while they were minding their own business. It's something that Americans did to themselves over the last few decades by raising children who see the worst and dirtiest jobs as beneath them, and then hiring hardworking **illegal immigrants** who don't have the luxury of doing the same.

If we're going to have this debate again, let's start from there and work our way forward.

RUBEN NAVARRETTE JR. is a San Diego Union-Tribune columnist.

## Classification

---

**Language:** ENGLISH

**Publication-Type:** Newspaper

**Subject:** IMMIGRATION (92%); UNEMPLOYMENT RATES (90%); **ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS** (89%); LABOR FORCE (78%); RECRUITMENT & HIRING (78%); US DEMOCRATIC PARTY (77%); WAGES & SALARIES (76%); ECONOMIC CONDITIONS (76%); DEMOGRAPHIC GROUPS (65%); HISTORY (65%); GRANDCHILDREN (50%)

**Person:** BARACK OBAMA (57%); LUIS V GUTIERREZ (57%)

**Geographic:** ILLINOIS, USA (79%); UNITED STATES (94%)

**Load-Date:** January 7, 2012