

Signs of Hope on Immigration

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Body

The political earthquake in Washington has knocked loose some of the big obstacles to fixing the immigration system. A decent solution is now there for the taking, if President Bush and the newly Democratic Congress are willing to grab it.

It won't be easy. Some of the debate's loudest shouters, liars and dead-horse beaters were ushered by voters from the room -- people like J. D. Hayworth and Randy Graf in Arizona, John Hostettler in Indiana and Rick Santorum in Pennsylvania. But the public is still in a prickly mood. All those shrill Republican ads about Mexicans stealing your Social Security failed as an electoral strategy, but that doesn't mean politicians always lose by being immigration hawks. Voters approved tough ballot measures. In Arizona, they made English the official language and restricted illegal immigrants' ability to sue, receive bail and qualify for benefits.

And except for the losers on the border-fixated fringe, not many in the restrictionist camp seem particularly chastened by the election. Senator Jon Kyl of Arizona, an opponent of the comprehensive reform bill that passed the Senate this year, won his race, as did several new Democrats who ran as immigration hard-liners. Local lawmakers in Texas and other states are still going after illegal immigrants with fervor.

The roots of a divisive, grinding immigration debate have not gone away. But it is crucial that the Democrats find their voice. The effort to revive immigration reform should start in the Senate. There is a decent bill under the barnacled hulk of legislation that passed the Senate last May. It used to be called McCain-Kennedy, before other senators tacked on tough-posing amendments that made it fundamentally unworkable and unjust. The Senate should strip those away, like the ones that divide immigrants into three arbitrary tiers of worthiness and needlessly force those seeking legal status to trek to a border state to apply for it.

The principles that guided the original McCain-Kennedy bill are those that should guide the coming reform effort: laws should be enforced at the border and workplace, fairly and evenhandedly; temporary worker programs must not be used to create a permanent official underclass; and any reform must be designed to work and not just create another smothering bureaucracy.

Immigration remains a high-voltage issue that Congress may be too timid or distracted to touch. The new Democratic leaders, including Speaker-elect Nancy Pelosi, have conspicuously not listed immigration among their most urgent priorities. Even Senator John McCain, who is an architect of the most reasonable bill out there but also has presidential primaries on his mind, spent a lot of time this fall stumping for misguided restrictionists like Mr. Graf. We hope he and his moderate colleagues have the integrity to honor their sensible immigration views now that the dismal '06 campaign is done.

Many voters who scorned Republicans over immigration reacted as you would expect them to after being mocked and exploited by a party that elevated the issue into an urgent crisis and then offered nothing to solve it but faux hearings, strident campaign ads and a pretend fence. The same fate may await any Democrats who posture, deceive and dawdle over immigration reform in the next Congress.

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