# American Dreams, Foreign Flags

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## Body

HUNDREDS of thousands of ***flag***-waving demonstrators took to the streets in Denver, Los Angeles, Phoenix and dozens of other cities in the last week to protest harsh legislation passed by the House that would make felons of the 12 million illegal aliens living in the United States -- along with anyone who provides them with shelter, food or other services. It didn't take long for a bipartisan majority on the Senate Judiciary Committee to get the message and take a softer tack.

On Monday, four Republicans joined all eight committee Democrats to vote down the controversial penalties. Their proposal also calls for admitting more legal immigrants and temporary workers, allowing illegal aliens already in the country to remain here and earn citizenship if they pay a fine, learn English and study ***American*** civics.

The Senate bill has a long way to go before becoming law, however. Despite their victory in this round, supporters of comprehensive immigration reform must be careful in their tactics, including what symbols they embrace. Although ***American*** ***flags*** were widely visible among the crowd of a half-million in downtown Los Angeles (organizers had asked marchers to bring them), reports indicated that they were outnumbered by those of Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador and other countries. And if history is any guide, those ***foreign*** banners could spur an anti-immigrant reaction.

That's what happened in 1994, when 70,000 people marched in Los Angeles, many waving Mexican ***flags***, to show their distaste for Proposition 187, a California ballot initiative that denied social services to illegal aliens and their children. Initially favored by more than 70 percent of voters, the measure was losing steam as the election approached, with a poll a week before the election showing it ahead by only 1 point. But that sea of green, white and red Mexican ***flags*** flooding the streets just before the election signaled to many Californians that those demanding equal treatment were more attached to their native country than to the United States. The proposition scored a surprisingly strong 59 percent of the vote, although the courts eventually declared it unconstitutional.

Similar dynamics are playing out today. For all the talk of national security and the economic costs of immigration, the underlying issue driving the current anti-immigrant frenzy is a deep suspicion that this latest group of newcomers won't do what others have before them did: learn English and embrace ***American*** identity.

Unfortunately, many Latino leaders play right into the hands of those who claim they are different from the Germans, Italians, Poles, Jews, Irish and others who came here in another era. With shouts of "Si, se puede!" (Yes, we can!) -- an old United Farm Workers rallying cry -- and signs announcing "We didn't cross the border, the border crossed us," the demonstrators are likely to turn off more Americans than they win over. And the sight of thousands

of angry Hispanic students from California to Virginia pouring out of schools to join protest marches will only reinforce stereotypes that Latinos care little about education.

Instead of presenting themselves as an aggrieved, ***foreign*** presence, immigration advocates ought to be explaining how similar Latinos are to other Americans in their values, aspirations and achievements. It's an easy case to make.

Mexican-born men, for example, are more likely to be in the labor force than any other racial or ethnic group, according to the Census Bureau. Nearly half of Latino immigrants own their own homes. While most immigrants from Latin America, especially Mexico and Central America, lag in educational attainment, their children are far more likely to stay in school: according to research by the Pew Hispanic Center, 80 percent of second-generation Latinos graduate from high school. Almost half of second-generation Latinos ages 25 to 44 have attended college, and those who graduate earn more on average than non-Hispanic white workers.

Latino immigrants are also starting their own businesses at a rapid pace. The Census Bureau reported that entrepreneurship among Latinos is increasing at a rate three times faster than that of other Americans. Americans of Hispanic descent now own 1.6 million businesses generating $222 billion annually; and while Census data didn't distinguish between immigrants and ***American***-born Hispanics, it suggested that much of this growth occurred in heavily immigrant communities.

Like every generation of immigrants before them, Latinos start out on the bottom rungs of the economic ladder, but they don't stay there. They are learning English as quickly as their predecessors, perhaps more quickly thanks to television (a majority of third-generation Latinos speak only English). They are intermarrying at faster rates than earlier ethnic groups, too, with about one-third of married ***American***-born Latinos having a non-Hispanic spouse.

These facts, if they were more widely known, would go a long way to calming fears about Latino immigration. If Latino advocates hope to influence the outcome of the Senate debate on immigration over the next two weeks, they would do well to spread the word -- and trade their ancestral ***flags*** for the Stars and Stripes.

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