

Immigration's Sideshow

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Body

The Obama administration, moving gingerly toward what the president has said will be a far-reaching overhaul of the nation's broken [immigration system](#), is trying to show at the outset that it is serious about enforcing existing laws.

A glimpse of the president's strategy came earlier this month, when Department of Homeland Security officials said they would [scrap](#) a Bush administration initiative, tied up in the courts, that would have used Social Security information to force employers nationwide to fire millions of unauthorized workers. Instead, DHS said it would require federal contractors to use a separate government database to verify that their employees are authorized to work here. At about the same time, Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano said the government would put [new limits](#) on local police who have been deputized by the feds to help deport undocumented immigrants.

[Immigration](#) advocacy groups scowl at such efforts to front-load enforcement before an overarching reform effort is undertaken, one that would grant legal status to millions of undocumented immigrants and expand the supply of visas for future immigrant workers. Many Republicans in Congress, meanwhile, want much tougher enforcement measures, while [opposing](#) any strategy that smacks of what they consider amnesty for illegal immigrants. They are all gearing up for a new battle as early as this fall.

The ingredients of the debate are familiar from the failed Bush-era attempts to fix [immigration](#), including the rhetorical excess of all sides. And while the administration's early, tentative moves have been attacked from both sides, in fact they are modest and reasonable steps that may set the stage for the fight ahead.

Take the employee verification program, known as E-Verify, that the Obama administration would require for federal contractors. Business and civil liberties groups dislike it, insisting that inaccuracies in the electronic data make reliance on such systems unfair. In fact, E-Verify is surprisingly accurate. Of 1.8 million E-Verify checks on workers made by employers between October and December last year, less than 0.5 percent of the system's initial responses were reversed on review, according to an [outside audit](#) commissioned by Homeland Security. And in Arizona, where businesses initially objected to the nation's broadest law requiring employers to check new hires through E-Verify, the state Chamber of Commerce, to its surprise, now acknowledges the system is working

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relatively smoothly and accurately. The federal government is correct that there's nothing inherently unreasonable about requiring companies to confirm that their employees are authorized to work in this country.

Then there is the federal program to deputize local police to help deport undocumented immigrants. Advocates of immigrant rights are correct that it has led to racial profiling and deepened mistrust between police departments and immigrant communities. But the DHS move last week aims to minimize abuses by forcing police to pursue all criminal charges that prompted an arrest in the first place; that should dissuade cops from slapping handcuffs on people suspected of no more than lacking valid documents.

It is tempting to think that the nation's economic anemia has sapped the immigration debate of its urgency. Given the pain of rising unemployment, why worry about legalizing undocumented workers, let alone clearing a path for still more immigrants to cross the border on the up and up? Why not just fine-tune enforcement, as the government is doing, and leave the rest for later?

The answer is that the government's moves, even if they tend to rationalize and improve on Bush administration policies, are essentially a diversion. Ditto the ongoing efforts to reinforce personnel and fencing along the Mexican border. Any serious solution to the nation's immigration mess will have to do more than make employers toe the line or dissuade police from following their worst instincts. The fact remains that enforcement by itself is only part of the problem, and it will not magically make 12 million undocumented immigrants disappear, provide a realistic framework for future immigrants or settle a noxious debate that has raged in virtually every state legislature in the country. As Congress gets set to tackle the immigration mess, the administration will need deft politicking, and a broad strategic lens, to push for a comprehensive solution.

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