

Immigration Reform and The Polarization of U.S. Society

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Robert Galbraith/Reuters

In the context of the immigration reform debate in the U.S., Latino community leaders have positioned themselves as key actors and leaders of immeasurable political weight who believe they have the capacity to exert a decisive influence on the decision-making processes of the legislative branch. But in fact the immigration reform process already underway at the Capitol and its impact in U.S. society demonstrate that the true landscape is completely

different from what these leaders might wish or presume.

On April 10 this year, when massive demonstrations took place in more than 30 cities throughout the U.S. in support of comprehensive immigration reform, mass media around the world registered this historic event, with an exaggerated euphoria on the part of Spanish-language print and broadcast media: “The giant has awakened,” cried out many TV and radio announcers. Millions of people in the streets demanding their acceptance by U.S. society and the legalization of 11 or 12 million undocumented immigrants

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were impossible to ignore at the White House and in the halls of Congress.

Unfortunately for these undocumented immigrants, almost universally motivated by economic need, the absence of national political recognition of the perpetually fragmented and disorganized circles of Latino leadership caused these sectors, together with the Spanish language media, to take advantage of the opportunity to make personal and political hay for themselves. They felt they were the leaders of a cause with humanitarian and social dimensions that has not had any effect on either the most conservative sectors of society or the white-dominated government.

As a result, Spanish-speaking radio announcers in cities like Los Angeles, Chicago, Houston and Miami have come to consider themselves the annointed heroes and leaders of undocumented immigrants and of the Latino community as a whole. And these media, instead of informing their listeners appropriately and objectively, have confused their audiences with their ignorance regarding the complexities of congressional decision-making machinery and their absence of command of the necessary details of the dozens of immigration reform bills pending on Capitol Hill.

These radio hosts frequently highlighted Republican Representative James Sensenbrenner (Republican of Wisconsin) and Chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, as the enemy of undocumented immigrants and as a racist politician. "Go out into the streets to demand the rejection of the Sensenbrenner Bill," was the exhortation directed to Latino and undocumented immigrant communities by these radio announcers days before the April 10 mobilizations. "Bush, tell the Senate to Say NO to the Sensenbrenner Bill,"

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chanted 30,000 demonstrators in front of the White House. The radio announcers had achieved their goal of confusing and misinforming undocumented immigrant communities.

House Bill (HB) 4437 or the Sensenbrenner Bill was approved by the House of Representatives last December. The bill makes illegal entry into the U.S. a federal crime and also establishes a basis to prosecute individuals, organizations, institutions, corporations and businesses that directly or indirectly provide aid to undocumented immigrants. HB 4437 also authorizes the construction of a double steel wire fence along 700 miles of the U.S.-Mexico border, and says nothing about the creation of a possible guest worker program or the legalization of the estimated 11 or 12 million undocumented immigrants who have lived and worked in the country for years.

The debate and approval of HB 4437 in the House was one of the most difficult and politically divisive processes of its kind in Congress in recent history. The conservative wing of the Republican Party and President George Bush himself pushed insistently for its approval. Paradoxically the most notable absences in this process were Latino community leaders.

Spanish language radio and TV announcers who are incapable of recog-

nizing their mistakes and ignorance regarding congressional procedure, called for the renowned marches and national economic boycott of May 1, building on the success of the April 10 mobilizations. Their objective was to demonstrate to politicians on the Hill that Latino and other undocumented communities throughout the country had the ability to paralyze the economy if the Senate insisted on approving the Sensenbrenner bill and failed to legalize millions of undocumented immigrants and create a new guest worker program.

Unlike the marches on April 10, the May 1 mobilizations were a failure, but despite this Spanish language TV and radio announcers claimed that as a result Congress was facing a dead end. Emboldered, the announcers stated they would remove members of Congress from Capitol Hill if they did not approve a comprehensive immigration reform and reject criminalization of illegal immigration. The defeat of politicians opposed to immigration reform would be combined, in their view, with a political backlash from Latino voters against hard-liners in the congressional midterm elections set for November 7.

But congressional response to the boycotts and marches was nil: undocumented immigrants cannot vote and that 20 percent of residents of foreign origin are naturalized citizens, and, in

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any case, their votes are not enough to make the difference in the upcoming congressional elections.

On May 25 the Senate approved Senate Bill (SB) 2611, which is quite different from the Sensenbrenner Bill. This bill classifies the undocumented population into three categories, authorizes the construction of a 300-mile triple steel fence and the placement of 150 miles of movable concrete barriers along the border, and also reaffirms initiatives by President Bush to send up to 6,000 National Guard troops to the border and to increase the Border Patrol to 19,000. It also reduces the worldwide number of employment visas provided annually from 400,000 to 250,000. The legal details of the Senate measure are contained in its 637 page text.

The bill provides that undocumented immigrants with 5 years or more of residence in the U.S. can be legalized, while those who arrived in the country between 2001 and 2004 are eligible for six years of authorized employment and the possibility of subsequent legalization. Those with less than two years of residence in the U.S. will have to leave the country in exchange for a vague possibility of returning as guest workers. All of this is conditioned upon payment of fines for tax evasion and absence of a criminal record.

Compared to the Sensenbrenner bill, SB 2611 might appear to be a panacea, though it continues to be characterized as insufficient by Latino community leaders and some Spanish-language radio and TV announcers who continue to misunderstand the legislative process in the U.S. In Los Angeles, for example, three Spanish-language radio announcers have taken for granted that comprehensive immigration reform has been achieved as a result of the marches and economic boycott.

Representative John Boehner, Republican majority leader in the House, stated during a press conference held just a few days after the Senate passed SB 2611 that only bills that had majority support in the Republican caucus would be submitted to a vote before the full House membership (232 of the 435 seats in the House are held by the Republicans and 203 by the Democrats). According to an internal poll conducted by staff working for Rep. Boehner, 174 of the 232 Republican House members are opposed to SB 2611.

Given this context, it is logical to assume that congressional passage of a bill reconciling the contradictory provisions of HB 4437 and SB 2611, with presidential approval, is impossible, despite the warnings of Latino leaders and their national campaign to register at least 1 million new voters among immi-

grants who have acquired citizenship before the November 7th mid-term elections.

The House and Senate Conference Committee which would have the task of reconciling the House and Senate bills has no immediate future. Boehner's prescription is precise: if the Senate approach is imposed over that of the House, there will be no debate or vote regarding its provisions, at least until after the congressional elections in November.

Political analysts, academics and experts on migration policy are more balanced in their assessment of the prospects for immigration reform, regardless of the role and influence of Latino communities in this process. What the leaders of these communities—who without digging any deeper characterize supporters of the Sensenbrenner bill as racists—do not understand is that in the U.S., as throughout the world, politicians respond and act on the basis of the interests of voters in their districts. This also explains why at minimum 174 Republican members of Congress support the criminalization of undocumented immigrants, since the voters in their districts are very conservative and incapable of accepting an immigration reform package that would benefit immigrants who entered the U.S. in violation of immigration law.

U.S. society is ideologically divided. In the November 2004 presidential elections, of the slightly more than 100 million voters who participated, about 53 million voted for the re-election of President Bush and the balance for Democratic Senator John Kerry. Various polls conducted by mass media in the U.S. indicate that 55 percent of those surveyed oppose comprehensive immigration reform and the remaining 45

percent support measures very similar to those approved by the Senate.

Up until now the only palpable and real effect of the massive demonstrations by Latino communities and of the uninformed and unbalanced statements by Spanish-language radio announcers in the U.S. has been a cosmetic shift by President Bush in the context of the immigration reform debate.

Bush applauded and highlighted the labor of legislators both in the House when they approved HB 4437 and in the Senate when they approved SB 2611, and has maintained one single inalterable stance throughout: support for a guest worker program with six years of authorized employment, culminating

in a definitive return to the country of origin of each worker participating.

The president supports the legalization of some undocumented immigrants but opposes any amnesty program; he also supports the creation of a guest worker program, the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border and the employment of any measures necessary to stem the flow of undocumented immigrants. The ambiguity of his approach has its origin in his failure to define what he really wants to see promulgated as law.

Latino and undocumented immigrant communities lack objective and detailed information about Bush's position, and thus fail to understand that

the cosmetic shift in his stance simply reflects a political strategy to attract the Latino vote, at least to guarantee a Republican victory in November.

The most plausible hope for the undocumented immigrant cause, beyond the political pretensions of the false leadership of Latino communities, is that the Republicans lose their current majority at least in the House.

For now the Democrats have a more moderate stance regarding immigration reform than the Republicans, although their political enemies are looking to the future when the weight of the Latino vote could determine the result not only of congressional elections but of the presidential contest itself. ■■



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