

The Challenge of Immigration: A Framework for Black–Latino Understanding and Progress

By: Rick Swartz, Strategic Solutions Washington

Today, as in ancient times, migration represents the profound human quest for survival, family, freedom, and progress. How we understand and address migration issues will shape the character and strength of the United States and our relations with the global community.

Building upon shared values and common interests, African Americans and Latinos can lead the country to achieve wise and just immigration policies. This will require efforts at the local and national levels to overcome suspicions and conflicts, real and perceived. It will require hardheaded understanding of the benefits and costs of immigration, and the courage of political leadership that reconciles differences, and builds trust, neighborhood by neighborhood.

Forging Latino–Black alliances on immigration will also require the recognition and defeat of dangerously powerful twenty-first century hate groups rooted in the ideology of the Ku Klux Klan that in communities nationwide, and through the media, spend tens of millions of dollars annually to enflame public anger against immigrants and conflicts among communities of color.

Over the years, our communities have joined to achieve greater justice on many issues, including immigration. As some have sought to divide and conquer, African American and Latino leaders, in cities and small towns, in schools and churches, and in the halls of Congress have united to provide sanctuary for asylum seekers, safe haven for war refugees, labor protection for the exploited, lawful status for the undocumented, and reunion for families.

The New Majority: Opportunity and Risk

Today, people of color, including immigrants, make up almost 35 percent of the United States population. The U.S. Census Bureau projects that by 2045, people of color will represent a majority of the population: approximately 29 percent Latino American, 13 percent African American, percent Asian and South Asian American, and 3 percent multiracial. The influx of immigrants, both recent and in the future, is a significant factor in the ever-changing mosaic of the American people.

In 2008, and increasingly as this century progresses, Black and Latino communities will have a major impact on the participation in, and the leadership of, all aspects of the nation's political, economic, and social institutions. Latino and Black communities must achieve understanding and progress on immigration so that misperceptions do not deepen divisions and undermine their common interests in broad reform endeavors.

Immigration reform strategies must align with efforts to achieve equity and justice in education, employment, health care, and criminal justice. Initiatives that increase opportunity and economic security—for example, job creation and retraining programs, strengthened rights to organize and worker protections, affordable health care, and fair trade agreements—can diminish the anti-immigrant resentment that hate groups, far-right media, and political demagogues exploit to create conflict among communities of color and other Americans.

The Demographics of Immigration

The Census Bureau recently reported that almost 39 million immigrants, both legal and undocumented, live in the United States. This represents 12.6 percent of the population.

- Approximately 12 million immigrants are from Mexico.
- About 5.3 million are from Central and Latin America.
- Almost 4 million are from the Caribbean and Africa. More than 25 percent of the Black population of New York, Miami, and Boston is foreign born.
- About 10 million immigrants are from Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East.
- Approximately 12-13 million immigrants in the United States are undocumented; more than 40 percent entered legally and overstayed their visas.

Immigrants and their U.S.-born children represent an ever-growing proportion of the populations of major states: 38 percent in California, 28 percent in New York and New Jersey, 25 percent in Nevada and Florida, and 18 to 22 percent in Texas, Arizona, and Illinois. Increasing numbers of immigrants live in states and communities in the Southeast and the Farm Belt, regions that historically have experienced deep racial conflicts (the roots of the Ku Klux Klan are in Indiana while its greatest violence occurred in the deep South). These regions now experience the most rapid growth of immigrant and Latino populations, contributing to racial and ethnic tensions, including tensions between Latino immigrants and native-born African Americans.

Given these demographic realities, native-born African Americans and Latinos have a deep mutual interest to achieve just policies regarding immigrants. So, too, immigrants have a deep interest to work with the native-born to overcome centuries of discrimination, injustice, and division. Outlined below are facts and considerations to provide a framework for Black–Latino unity based upon honest understanding, common interests, and shared values.

Facts

African American and Latino Attitudes on Immigration

A June 2008 Gallup poll found:

- 64% of all Americans say immigration is a good thing;
- 68% of Latinos and 56% of Blacks say immigration levels should be maintained or increased;
- 62% of Blacks but only 30% of Latinos say undocumented immigrants are a drain on taxpayer resources;
- 87% of Latinos and 70% of Blacks say undocumented immigrants mostly take jobs that American workers don't want.

An October 2007 Pew Hispanic Center poll of Latinos found:

- 50% fear they or a family member or friend could be deported;
- 66% say failure to enact immigration reform has made life more difficult for all Latinos;
- 75% oppose workplace raids;
- 79% oppose local police enforcement;
- Native-born Latinos are more supportive of immigration enforcement than the foreign born.

A Pew Hispanic Center poll of Latinos, released in September 2008, found that 50 percent "say that the situation of Latinos in this country is worse now than it was a year ago," and deteriorating as anti-immigrant sentiments and enforcement activities intensify across the country.

In 2007, Lake Research Partners conducted a poll and focus groups for the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights on attitudes on immigration in the African American community. Key findings include:

- Of a range of issues, only 6 percent of African Americans rated immigration as among their two greatest concerns.
- "Seven in 10 African American voters support a comprehensive immigration reform proposal that would include establishing a path to citizenship for undocumented workers, more resources to greatly increase border security, [and] much tougher penalties on employers who hire illegal workers."
- "Eighty percent or more African Americans found it very or somewhat convincing that immigration reform is needed for security, that immigrants are not the enemy of the community, that racists and others want to divide minorities and create conflict among them, and that everyone has common human rights and responsibilities."

- “African American attitudes toward immigrants are driven by economic stress, not racial animus.”
- “African Americans widely believe that immigrants are receiving benefits from the government that are not broadly available to African Americans.”
- “The common agenda between African Americans and immigrants is rooted in values—centered on family, equal opportunity, and the American Dream. Fighting racial profiling can be an area of joint effort.”
- “Progress on immigration attitudes in this community will require a multi-faceted effort—highlighting and building on shared values, using media and engaging community spokespeople such as ministers, and supporting practical steps to reform the immigration system and address economic and security concerns.”

Immigrant Work Force Participation, Impact on Native Workers, and Long-Term Fiscal Implications

The Census Bureau reports that “of the 22.2 million civilian employed foreign born age 16 and older in 2006, 27.2 percent worked in management, professional, and related occupations; 22.5 percent in service occupations; 18.3 percent in sales and office occupations; 16.7 percent in production and transportation; and 13.5 percent in construction, extraction, maintenance, and repair occupations.”

A July 2006 Migration Policy Institute survey of research on the impact of immigrants on native workers reports:

- “Recent research is divergent as to whether immigrants lower U.S. -born workers’ wages, even those of the most vulnerable groups. While some researchers have found no wage effects or even positive ones as a result of immigration, others have found significantly negative impacts. The field has devoted new attention to the specific wage impact of highly skilled immigrants, but these findings have also been mixed. Researchers have more consistently found that there is some job displacement, or at least growing exclusion, of native workers in industries or areas with many immigrants.”
- “Some research has also shown particularly negative effects for African American workers. One study examined wage effects from 1980 to 2000 and found a 4.5 percent wage decline for African American workers as a result of immigration, compared to 3.5 percent for Whites.”
- “Another study, based on in-depth interviews with Los Angeles employers—spanning 170 businesses that included restaurants, printers, hotels, and furniture manufacturers—found evidence of network recruiting among Latino immigrants, negative employer perceptions of native African American workers, and workplace tension between African American and immigrant workers.”
- “Although very limited, some research has addressed the possibility that high immigration flows, at least over time, give natives an employment boost. In his case study of New York and the ethnic division of labor,

[UCLA sociologist Roger] Waldinger argued that new immigrants followed African Americans in low-level positions, effectively pushing the latter up the economic chain.”

Fewer Taxpaying Workers to Support Non-Working Elderly

Assuming current immigration levels continue, the Census Bureau projects that the number of workers will decrease from 4.98 for each elderly dependent in 2000, to 2.71 workers per elderly dependent in 2050. These trends anticipate that over the next 40 years and beyond, the taxpayer—native-born as well as immigrants and their descendants—will face sharply increasing tax burdens. This has significant implications for the economy, Social Security, and the fiscal dangers facing federal, state, and local governments.

Immigration increases and higher productivity may mitigate these trends. But higher tax burdens may discourage immigration, and the rapidly declining fertility rates in Mexico and other sending countries may reduce the pool of willing immigrants. Future sources of immigration are likely to differ markedly.

Implications

The United States economy is in trouble. The downturn is greatest in sectors such as construction and hospitality that historically have provided opportunities for African Americans but in recent years have witnessed the growing participation of immigrants, particularly Latinos. As unemployment increases, exploitation intensifies. Growing numbers of lower-skilled workers, native born and immigrant alike, are in competition for fewer jobs, increasing the risks of resentment and conflict.

The exploding housing and credit crisis is most acute in high-immigrant states such as California, Nevada, and Florida, and it disproportionately affects minorities who secured high-cost mortgages now at great risk of foreclosure. Today, Congress grapples to construct a massive economic rescue that will cost taxpayers hundreds of billions of dollars. Failure, our leaders warn, portends economic collapse, massive unemployment, and the danger of a rapid intensification of social conflict based on race, ethnicity, class, and immigrant status. This heightens the power of anti-immigrant and other hate groups, intensifying the risks of violence.

In this context, raids, profiling, state and local police harassment, and the scapegoating of immigrants, and minorities in general, have emerged as a clear and present danger. Immigrants increasingly are driven underground, afraid to send their children to school or seek medical care. Immigrants with jobs fear arrest, deportation, and the loss of their children. Already, these conditions have compelled growing numbers of immigrants to curtail remittances to their home countries, threatening economic hardships in their countries that aggravate the injustices that force many immigrants to flee to the United States in the first place.

A climate of fear and uncertainty makes it harder to enact just immigration reforms. It increases the risk of tension and conflict between native-born Blacks and Latinos and against immigrants in general. A slowdown in the nation's economy will reverberate strongly in Mexico, Central America, the Caribbean, and

other countries with large immigrant populations in the United States. In these times, it is more important than ever that Latino and Black communities achieve understanding and forge alliances on all aspects of their shared destinies in the United States as well as on the challenging and divisive issues of immigration.

Proposed Immigration Reform Agenda to Unite Black and Latino Communities

No one knows how the election and economic or social realities will affect future prospects for immigration reform and related international activities. Outlined below are international and domestic policy objectives that can unite Latino and Black communities based on shared values and common interests. Political conditions will affect whether progress is best achieved through comprehensive omnibus immigration reform or through targeted, incremental legislative and political strategies.

Outcomes on immigration will be shaped not just by policy reform but also by the broad sweep of economic, social, and global realities. Hardship, injustice, and war compel people to flee. In developed countries, long-term labor market and fiscal trends suggest that the United States and Europe may want to increase immigration in future years as the baby boom generation ages.

Pragmatic, progressive reform objectives could include:

- Improve conditions in home countries that compel unauthorized or illegal migration, addressing social, economic, and political inequality and injustice. Actions to this end could involve reform of United States trade, development, military and human rights policies that aggravate conditions abroad and intensify migration pressures.
- Increase enforcement of federal and local labor laws to reduce exploitation and incentives to hire undocumented workers because of their vulnerable status. Prohibit state and local anti-immigrant laws and crackdowns.
- Strengthen enforcement of laws focused on smugglers, visa overstays, identity/document fraud, and criminal offense.
- Allow undocumented immigrants with strong roots and equities to earn legal status and eventual citizenship. Specific eligibility requirements and terms for legalization must be practical and fair. Priority might be given to those with children born in the United States, immigrants who have spent substantial time here, and those who have skills that address labor shortages and/or pending applications for family reunification visas.
- Reduce backlogs of family-based visa applications and increase the number of total family visas authorized, giving priority to the spouses and minor children of green card holders already in the United States.
- Establish an independent agency to assess and manage labor market shortages. Such an agency could be empowered to determine how many

immigrant workers are needed in what industries to address persistent labor shortages. All workers admitted for these purposes should have quick, if not immediate, access to a green card and be allowed to bring their immediate family. Temporary guest worker programs should not be available except for truly seasonal labor. If the United States economy needs a person's labor, whether skilled or unskilled, he or she should have a full opportunity to become an American.

- Provide permanent status to 500,000 Central Americans, Haitians, and Liberians who for years have had temporary legal status but no access to green cards.
- Provide impact aid for state and local governments for health, education, and other costs arising from immigration.

Strategies for Leadership and Organizing

Throughout the country, Black, Latino, and other community leaders provide strong examples of the many ways to address the myriad community and policy challenges brought on by failed status quo federal immigration policy. In North Carolina, Florida, Maryland, and Los Angeles, community leaders have joined hands to condemn the hate mongers, protect civil rights, and address community tensions. We need to praise such leaders, raise needed funds, and raise the profile of their successes to serve as examples for replication.

The time is now for the African American and Latino communities to engage in honest dialogue, address conflicts and tensions, and explore mutual opportunities. Advocacy to enact immigration reform policies should be aligned with strategies on education, employment, health care, and criminal justice reform. Youth and schools are central to progress.

Immediately after the election, many communities and institutions around the country will take stock. The organizers of this meeting are committed to work with Latino, African American, and other communities to forge concrete initiatives on the far-reaching challenges of human migration. Dialogue and action at the local level, from the bottom up, are essential to achieve understanding and progress for the nation.