

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 30, 2013 at 1:45pm

The impetus for immigration reform

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NCR Today

There is finally movement on comprehensive immigration legislation. A bipartisan group of senators has produced an agreement of principles that could lead to action. President Barack Obama in a speech in Las Vegas has endorsed these principles and encouraged Congress to act.

The principles include a path to citizenship, a guest worker program, and action on a form of the DREAM Act for those who were brought here as children. Also, those individuals who are studying in our universities and earn degrees in engineering and computer science will be permitted and encouraged to remain in this country.

What has now changed to make such legislation possible? President George W. Bush and Sen. John McCain pushed for comprehensive reform back in 2005, and it was scuttled by angry citizens who saw the legislation as amnesty. They felt there would be job losses, damage to the economy, and that lawbreakers were being given a free pass. Many also feared their way of life might disappear because of the influx of a strange and different group of people.

How has the landscape changed? The most obvious change is the 2012 election, in which Obama received 71 percent of the Latino vote. Many Republicans understand that permanent demographic changes will require meaningful outreach to Latino voters. In order to win presidential elections, Republicans will need a larger share of the Latino vote. But have those angry citizens of 2005 actually changed their minds? What about Republicans in gerrymandered congressional districts? Will they sign on? Can they convince their constituents that change on this issue is essential if the party is to survive as a national party?

Finally, is this endeavor just about politics? Is there also a desire to do what is right? For that matter, do we know what is right in the case of immigration? It is certainly true that every country must control their borders, and in these days of terrorist threats, we need to know who is entering and who is present in our

country. Yet too often, this reality has led to draconian laws and the mistreatment of perceived "illegals." Even the legislation proposed by the bipartisan group of senators may be looking at enforcement as a means of delaying or even preventing a realistic path to citizenship.

Hopefully, as we move toward the passage of legislation, we will remember a few important truths. The Declaration of Independence proclaimed that all men are created equal. This truth was not limited to American citizens. All also possessed the inalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. For starters, that means all those in our country, whether legally or illegally, deserve our respect and humane treatment. Every effort must be made to preserve and keep families together. Also, it is important to remember that these immigrants are contributing members of our society. They are working, paying taxes, and their young people are developing skills and education that will benefit our country in the future. Those who are not meeting these kinds of expectations can and should be returned to their country of origin, but painting all undocumented workers with the same brush is nothing if not discriminatory.

Unfortunately, there will continue to be those who remain opposed to immigration reform. Nothing will convince these individuals that this legislation is anything other than amnesty. Therefore, if pragmatism is to be the determining factor in moving this necessary legislation forward, then let it proceed with all due speed.

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